

Sound and Modernity in Joseph Conrad's London Fiction

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

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Declaration of Authorship

I Patricia Jane Pye hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed _____

Dated _____

Abstract

While Conrad's representation of London has previously been discussed, these readings have not considered his auditory impressions of the city. This thesis explores this neglected area, in the context of London's changing 'soundscape' in the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian period. These changes encompassed a reconstructed topography and conflicts over public spaces, in addition to the appearance of new auditory technologies. The thesis argues for the significance of Conrad's sound impressions in this urban context, posing the original question of whether his fictionalized city 'sounds modern'.

Alongside the rapid development of a popular press, the 1890s also witnessed a resurgence of interest in oratory, as the power of the 'platform' played its own part in influencing social change. Chapter 1 focuses on *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and considers Conrad's representation of London's social agitators, together with his auditory impressions of the city's vast crowd. More broadly, the chapter also explores the contemporary figure of the 'workman orator', as characterized through *The Secret Agent's* Verloc. Chapter 2 focuses on the silences and noises of 'The Return', arguing that these express much about London's social topographics and contemporary fears about urban disorder. Chapter 3 traces the progress of the 'news' across the city in *The Secret Agent*, arguing that this novel reflects its transitional era, when the newly literate negotiated the move from a traditionally oral- to print-based culture. Finally, Chapter 4 argues for the influence of music-hall on Conrad's work, in particular the contemporary interest in the verbal artistry of its comedians. Marlow's comedic tone in *Chance* is

located in this context, as an expression of popular performance from a notably modern and urbane figure.

The thesis concludes by identifying some interrelated themes which reveal the significance of Conrad's sound impressions to wider discussions about the modernity of his fiction.

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, my thanks are due to my supervisor, Professor Robert Hampson of Royal Holloway College, University of London, for his enthusiasm and support throughout. I am also grateful to other Conradians for their interest in my research and my work has benefited greatly from the opportunity to present early versions of material at annual conferences of the Joseph Conrad Society (UK). Chapter 3 of this thesis is an extended and adapted version of my article ‘Hearing the News in *The Secret Agent*’, *The Conradian*, 34:2 (2009), 51-63. The thesis also includes material from my earlier article ‘A City that “disliked to be disturbed”: London’s Soundscape in *The Secret Agent*’, *The Conradian*, 32:1 (2007), 21-35.

The help of archive staff has been invaluable and I would especially like to thank Ian Rawes of the British Library Sound Archive for information about sound recordings. Thanks are also due to my employer, Bucks New University, for granting the periods of scholarly leave that helped me to bring the thesis to completion. Finally, I would like to record my gratitude to my parents for their encouragement and patience, and for all the childhood trips to London which first stimulated my interest in the city.

List of Abbreviations

Details of editions referred to are as specified in the Bibliography. References to Conrad's letters are to *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, 9 vols, ed. by Laurence Davies *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983-2007).

<i>CL</i>	<i>Collected Letters</i>
<i>LE</i>	<i>Last Essays</i>
<i>MoS</i>	<i>The Mirror of the Sea</i>
<i>NLL</i>	<i>Notes on Life and Letters</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>A Personal Record</i>
<i>SoS</i>	<i>A Set of Six</i>
<i>TH</i>	<i>Tales of Hearsay</i>
<i>TLS</i>	<i>'Twixt Land and Sea</i>
<i>TU</i>	<i>Tales of Unrest</i>
<i>WT</i>	<i>Within the Tides</i>

Introduction

And for a time the walls of St Stephen's, with its towers and pinnacles, contemplated in immobility and silence a cab that jingled. (122)

The term 'soundscape' was first coined in the 1970s by the Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer who defines it as our 'sonic environment', within which we hear a location's distinctive sounds.¹ The British Library's 'Sound Map' will provide a record of our twenty-first century soundscape for future generations.² No such record exists for the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian era. However, two modern re-creations of London street sounds in the British Library's Sound Archive give some impression of ambient sounds from those times.³ The difference between a panting, jingling horse (quite audibly a living thing) and a motorized bus is plain to hear, and expresses one of the most significant auditory changes that occurred during the period when Conrad was writing his major works.

The aural impressionism of 'uproarious jingling' (127) from the cab taken by the Verloc family to the Peckham almshouses was a familiar sound of the late-1880s, but an outdated one by the time of publication of *The Secret Agent* in 1907. By this time, electrically-powered and

¹ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), p.274. First published in 1977 as *The Tuning of the World*. Schafer's Vancouver-based 'World Soundscape Project', 1971-1976, was the first major research study in this field.

² The 'Sound Map' includes recordings of different environments in the UK, which were submitted between July 2010-2011. See British Library Sound Archive, 'Sound Map' <<http://www.sounds.bl.uk/Sound-Map/UK-Soundmap>> [accessed 15 November 2012].

³ British Library Sound Archive, Victorian and Edwardian Street Sounds (ICD0126081, 1994).

motorized cabs had introduced new sounds to the London streets.⁴ The impact of these, as with most technological changes, extended far beyond day-to-day street noise. On their perambulations around the Kennington Lane district in the late-1890s, Charles Booth's observers noted the unpopularity of the new 'taxameters' with the drivers, who were now out in their new machines all day, without a break to change horses and an opportunity to return home for a shared (and thereby less expensive) meal with the family.⁵ Despite all the hardships of exposure to the elements, their previous lifestyle had evidently had its compensations, not the least of which must have been a feeling of independence and freedom, and a living relationship with the cab horse, that 'partner' in their 'labours' (129), as Conrad describes in *The Secret Agent*.

Conrad's cabman is recognizable as an impoverished and ageing driver of a 'four-wheeler', one of the (soon to be) 'pensioned veterans of the whip [...] much battered by the storms of life', whom the journal *Cab Trade Record* describes at a charity dinner in 1904.⁶ A policeman reassures Winnie Verloc at the outset of her journey that her cabman has been driving for twenty years. Those 'benumbing years of sedentary exposure to the weather' (123), and to drink, as his 'bloated and sodden face' expresses (122), have left the cabman with a whispering voice

⁴ The first motorized cabs were introduced onto the London streets in 1903. Before this time, electrically-powered vehicles had been trialled but these proved unsuccessful and were withdrawn in 1900. By July 1907, it was compulsory to fit a 'taxameter' or 'taximeter' in London cabs. See Bill Monroe, *A Century of London Taxis* (Marlborough: Crowood Press, 2005).

⁵ Notebook B365 (1899), Police Notebooks from the Collection of Working Papers for *The Survey of Life and Labour of the People in London, 1886-1903* (London: Charles Booth Archive, London School of Economics).

⁶ *Cab Trade Record*, February 1904, p.10. At this time, the Cab Drivers' Trade Union was campaigning for better working conditions, leading to protest meetings in May 1904 and a strike in the following July. As this publication indicates, modernity was not leading to many improvements for this social group: amongst the irksome changes they faced was the introduction of the new-fangled telephone in their shelters, placing them at the auditory beck and call of their wealthier customers.

‘strained almost to extinction’ (123).⁷ Through the repetition of this ‘extinct voice’ (128), the descriptions of the cabman’s ‘decayed clothing’ (127), the skeletal horse, and the dilapidated ‘Cab of Death’ (131) itself, Conrad gives an impression of a mode of transport that has clearly had its day. The cab should have been discarded: ‘cast out into the gutter on account of irremediable decay’ (131). However, the ‘grotesque misery’ (131) and cruelties of a harsh life on the streets seem momentarily to be transcended at the end of this journey, as the cabman supports his equine companion to a nearby pub, the ‘horse’s head held aloft in his fist’ (130). The cabman and his family are harnessed into economic interdependency with the decrepit horse: ‘the poor cabman beating the poor horse in the name, as it were, of his poor kids at home’ (132). This is the ‘corresponding idea’ which leads Stevie to his protestation that this is a ‘Bad world for poor people’ (132). The Verlocs’ cabman is aware of the way the world worked: he ‘lacked not independence or sanity’ (123). Although desperately poor and, as a night cabman, reliant on whatever horses are left in the yard, he has a measure of autonomy arguably lacking in the lives of his more ‘modern’ colleagues.

The episode above provides a powerful visual impression of poverty and decrepitude. However, the sounds of the four-wheeler are equally significant. This ‘jolting, rattling, and jingling cab’ (123) sounds old and poor, in a city that was attuning itself to the sound of the new. This contrast is rather neatly encapsulated in an 1887 advert for the ‘new Victoria hansom’ in the *Illustrated London News*, where the ‘oscillation, noise, and rattle’ of a journey in an outmoded four-wheeler is contrasted

⁷ Booth’s observers noted that the cabmen suffered from chest complaints aggravated by a combination of the weather and a predilection for heavy drinking. See Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, Second Series: Industry 3 (London: Macmillan, 1903), pp.301-2.

with the ‘noiseless, rapid, automatically effected’ operation of a hansom.⁸ The noise level of the four-wheeler was greatly enhanced by the striking of its iron wheels against the granite setts which still predominated on the roads in the poor districts of London to the south and east. As the Verlocs’ cab passes the Houses of Parliament (St Stephen’s) and progresses into the Westminster Bridge Road, the aural effect of this becomes painfully apparent when Winnie’s mother has to scream ‘above the noise’ (123) in order for her daughter to hear her. As Bartholomew’s 1908 ‘Road Surface Map’ indicates, London’s social topographics were marked by auditory contrasts at street level.⁹ Noisy granite surfacing still predominated in the poor areas, while asphalt was used elsewhere, and wood (the most sound-absorbent surface) was used in the wealthiest districts in the West End. This contrast can be heard in *The Secret Agent*. In wealthy Belgravia, where Conrad locates the Russian Embassy, it is notable that the hansom move with an ‘almost silent, swift flow’(17).

As illustrated above, Conrad’s aural impressions of a journey across the city evoke much more than the jingling of a horse’s harness and a cab’s windows. The Verlocs’ journey can be read both as an accurate record of an outmoded form of transport and as audible representation of social difference in late-Victorian London. Within the wider narrative of the Victorian social journey from (quiet) respectability to (noisy) penury, Winnie’s mother makes an especially symbolic move from north of the river, across Westminster Bridge and into the south-east of the city. Visual impressions of an iconic Houses of Parliament watching the humble horse-drawn four-wheelers traversing this bridge have, of course, been preserved for posterity by photographic images. This familiar scene on the London landscape is brought to life as a soundscape by Conrad’s

⁸ ‘New Victoria Hansom’ (advertisement), *Illustrated London News*, 30 July 1887, p.130.

⁹ ‘Road Surface Map’ (London: John Bartholomew, 1908).

treatment of the jingling cab. Through Conrad's intermittent repetition of its sounds, an impression is created of the cab moving through the city's streets and an auditory depth is thus added to an increasingly touristic London scene.

In his study of the representation of sound in literature, Raymond Chapman suggests that aural impressions are often incidental to a reader's engagement with a narrative: 'shared accuracy of perception', he notes, is generally unimportant, rather 'the reader is taking a silent part in the whole imagined experience and not entering closely into its auditory dimension'.¹⁰ This thesis will argue that the aurality of Conrad's London achieves the opposite effect. Conrad's impressions invite a direct engagement with the city's 'auditory dimension' (soundscape) which provides a means through which not only to explore the aurality of modern urban experience, but also to reference some of the socio-cultural factors which informed this. It is useful to begin with a discussion about what might make a city sound 'modern'.

The 'blend' and the 'blur' of modern urban experience

The electrically-powered cabs which were tried out on London's streets in the late-1890s were popularly referred to as 'humming birds', thus expressing one of modernity's most familiar sounds.¹¹ In *The Soul of London* (1905), Conrad's friend and collaborator Ford Madox Ford describes the sound of an electric tram as a 'heavy, impersonal groan', likening it to a 'new form of silence'.¹² A 'groan', like a 'hum', suggests

¹⁰ Raymond Chapman, *The Treatment of Sounds in Language and Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p.20.

¹¹ Songs about the cabs and their drivers featured in music-hall entertainments during this time. See Christopher Pulling, *They Were Singing: And What They Sang About* (London: Harrap, 1952), p.119.

¹² Ford Madox Ford, *The Soul of London: A Survey of a Modern City* (London: Everyman, 1995), p.30.

a constant sound, and one which is not especially ‘noisy’. The communications theorist Barry Truax has identified ‘hums and drones’ as features of the modern soundscape; in acoustic terms, such sounds are notable for the relative absence of individually discernible notes, as the constant hum of electrical goods and traffic has come to exemplify.¹³ Such sounds produce a ‘broad-band’ of acoustic frequency, that is to say a steady and constant drone, as in the case of ‘white noise’.¹⁴ The resultant masking effect can lead to this type of noise being paradoxically perceived as a form of silence, as Ford describes.

The traffic hummed and so did London’s vast human crowd, numbered at 5.5 million in 1890 and making it the world’s largest city.¹⁵ In contrast, Warsaw, which Conrad visited that year, had a population of half a million.¹⁶ In ‘London Impressions’ (1897), Stephen Crane evokes the eerie effect of this mass of humanity as ‘a low drone, perhaps, a humming contributed to inevitably by the closely gathered thousands and yet on second thoughts it was to me a silence’.¹⁷ In *The Soul of London*, Ford describes the city in similar terms, as ‘essentially a background, a matter so much more of masses than of individuals’; he likens London to an ‘immense symphony-orchestra’, whose sound is like a ‘ground bass, a drone, on top of which one pipes one’s own small individual melody’.¹⁸ Acoustics aside, this sound is also arguably modern because it confuses

¹³ Barry Truax, *Acoustic Communication*, 2nd edn (Westport, CT: Ablex, 2001).

¹⁴ Truax (p.26) defines it thus: ‘sounds whose spectrum or energy is continuously distributed over a fairly large range of frequencies. When that range is the entire audible spectrum and the distribution uniform, the sound is called “white noise,” by analogy to “white light,” which contains all visible frequencies’.

¹⁵ Peter Brooker, *Modernity and Metropolis: Writing, Film, and Urban Formations* (Basingstoke, Palgrave: 2002), p. 5.

¹⁶ Zdzisław Najder, ‘Conrad’s Warsaw’, in *Conrad’s Cities: Essays for Hans van Marle*, ed. by Gene Moore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), pp.31-38 (p.35).

¹⁷ Stephen Crane, ‘London Impressions’, in *The Works of Stephen Crane*, Vol. 8: *Tales, Sketches and Reports* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1973), pp. 681-89 (p.683).

¹⁸ Ford, *The Soul of London*, p.11.

our natural auditory capabilities: it cannot be, to use Ford's terms, 'caught by any human ear'.¹⁹

Ford identifies a psychological effect within the city, but it should not be forgotten that the impression of London as a background was an actuality for the incoming or outgoing traveller. Before London's limits were blurred by the process of suburbanization, the sensory contrast between the town and countryside must have been especially apparent. By the mid-nineteenth century, it took quite a while, on foot at least, to get 'clear of London', as Dickens describes in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41) in the episode where Nell and her grandfather begin their long walk out of the city.²⁰ Once they have left the city, the contrast becomes clear, as they sit on a hill and look back at St Paul's and the city below. There the 'thousand exquisite scents and sounds that floated in the air' are described as 'deep joys' for 'those whose life is in a crowd or who live solitarily in great cities as in the bucket of a human well'.²¹ The city could be seen, but equally it could be heard, smelt and felt, as Dickens evokes elsewhere in his work. In *Bleak House* (1852-3), for example, Esther Summerson approaches London by stage-coach and decides it is time to 'watch for London' but she is not certain that she has arrived there until the stony roads make the coach jolt and shake.²² Once in London, Esther encounters so much dirt, fog and noise that she wonders 'how the people kept their senses'.²³

Approaching the city by foot or stagecoach inevitably involved a broader sensory experience than merely observing it through a train window. Walking also allowed more choice over the point of view and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.122.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.36.

²³ Ibid., p.37.

audition, as Dickens's description in *The Old Curiosity Shop* reminds us. In 1905, Ford notes that walking into London is 'no longer modern' and largely now the habit of the tramp or gypsy.²⁴ By this period, as he describes, the motor-car had quickened the journey to such an extent that the change from a rural to urban scene was hard to identify. Approaching London by sea and river, as was the experience of Conrad during his maritime career, arguably had much in common with walking into the city, insofar as there was time to see, hear (and smell) the city in the distance.

Aural comparisons with other cities appearing in Conrad's fiction are beyond the scope of my thesis, although it should be noted at the outset that the aurality of Victorian and Edwardian London must have shared many similarities with other modern cities. In Marseilles, for example, where Conrad stayed for an extended period in his youth, he would have heard the contrast between silence and noise that is so indicative of a city with a port. Walter Benjamin describes the manner in which the sounds of Marseilles could suddenly be 'caught', and notes that these encompassed the density of the clamour around the harbour district to the silences of 'deserted corners'.²⁵ The sixteen-year-old Conrad first arrived in Marseilles in 1874, and as he later acknowledged, it had a significant impact on his imagination, as impressions of the city in *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) attest.²⁶ In this novel, the narrator describes how he sought some respite from the 'night gaieties' of the Cannebière (the central thoroughfare in Marseilles) in the 'dimness of quiet streets' (135). Elsewhere, the feeling of being suddenly assailed by urban noise is described in 'Amy Foster' (1903), through the castaway Yanko Goorall's

²⁴ Ford, *The Soul of London*, p.11.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, 'Marseilles', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and ed. by Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) p.132.

²⁶ See John Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad* (London: Heinemann, 2007), pp. 22-3.

impressions of the ‘noise and smoke and gloom’ and the ‘clang of iron’ (115) of the railway station in Berlin, a city Conrad had visited in 1890.

However, London was clearly very different from Conrad’s home city of Cracow. As Andrzej Braun has described, Conrad revisited Cracow in 1914, and was pleased to find it unchanged.²⁷ The extent of London’s rapid growth and change during the late-Victorian era caused the progress of modernity to be especially acutely felt there. This was London’s ‘era of reconstruction’ (9), as Conrad terms it in *The Secret Agent*, when the city’s defining acoustics were transformed forever, as the sixteenth-century maze of bystreets and alleys was replaced by wide thoroughfares on the Parisian model.²⁸ The sheer size of London’s human crowd, combined with the volume of traffic, meant that the individual was especially likely to feel subsumed by the mass. Andrew Thacker likens the perception of the modern crowd to a ‘blur’ of individual faces too numerous to differentiate between.²⁹ The auditory equivalent of this may be identified as the ‘blend’, which is an effect evoked by Conrad in *The Secret Agent*. In an alleyway near Tottenham Court Road, where Chief Inspector Heat encounters the Professor, ‘the blended noises of the enormous town sank down to an inarticulate low murmur’ (68).

If, as noted above, sounds like the ‘hum’ and ‘murmur’ are modern in acoustic terms, they are also suggestive of a psychological response to a city in which there was such a multiplicity of noise that the individual felt overwhelmed. Impressions of the London ‘buzz’ and ‘hum’ also appear in seventeenth-century accounts of London, as Bruce R. Smith has

²⁷ Andrzej Braun, ‘Cracow in the Life of Joseph Conrad’, in *Conrad’s Cities*, ed. by Moore, pp.49-56.

²⁸ As discussed by Donald J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London: Batsford, 1976).

²⁹ Andrew Thacker, *Moving through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.101.

identified.³⁰ As Londoners gathered in and around locations like Westminster Hall, St Paul's and the Royal Exchange to trade and share news, the blended sound of massed voices made an impression on chroniclers of the city, as this 1629 description by John Earle suggests: 'The noyse in it is like that of Bees, a strange humming or buzze, mixt of walking, tongues, and feet: It is a kind of still roare or loud whisper'.³¹ However, it would seem that individual noises could still be clearly discerned. Smith suggests that the early-modern city was 'full of sound': this was not a broad-band 'drone' but a 'scatter' of clearly discernible noises: 'jingles, bangs, crunches, clops – and voiced *words*'.³² This was a city in which the sound of humanity was still much in evidence. In contrast, the sounds of the London Docks in the 1880s are described thus:

horses' hoofs on the stones, the puffing of many steam engines, the blows of heavy hammers, the grind of pulleys, the groaning capstans [...] the voices of a million men. [...] the ear, too rapidly struck by the multiplicity of sonorous vibrations, no longer transmits any sound. You are deafened; you feel the noise, but no longer hear it.³³

The above account expresses the concerns about sensory overload to which Georg Simmel would later draw attention in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), where he describes, in visual terms, how an urban existence flooded the human consciousness with too many 'rushing impressions' to process.³⁴

³⁰ See Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the 0-factor* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999).

³¹ John Earle, *Micro-Cosmographie. Or, A Peece of the World Discovered; in Essayes and Characters. The fift Edition much enlarged* (London: Robert Allot, 1629). Quoted by Smith, p.61.

³² Smith, p.58. The 'London Sound Survey' provides an extensive mapping of descriptions of sounds in works from different historic periods:

<http://www.soundsurvey.org.uk/index.php/survey/historical_so/social> [accessed 20 June 2013].

³³ Paul Villars, *London and its Environs*, trans. by Henry Frith (London: Routledge, 1888), p.50.

³⁴ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. by Richard Sennett (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp.47-60 (p.48).

Such reactions to the city are apparent in mid-nineteenth-century accounts, such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (1845), where the narrator describes a thoroughfare as 'full of a noisy and inordinate vivacity which jarred discordantly upon the ear, and gave an aching sensation to the eye'.³⁵ However, as the nineteenth century progressed, perceptions of sensory overload were enhanced by greater mobility, as the urban scene rushed past at an ever-increasing rate. As Thacker discusses, the late nineteenth-century city was perpetually on the move, and on the expanding transport networks, like the underground, this perception that the number of faces, and the number of visual images (in the form of advertisements), exceeded the human gaze, was especially apparent.³⁶ Confined within the space of bus, tram, and train, the modern urban traveller thereby experienced a combination of visual overload and auditory deprivation. The volume of people and the advertisements all ensured that there was a lot to see, but hearing was rather more problematic. The sheer size of the crowd and volume of surrounding noise, from the streets and the transport itself, militated against conversation and meaningful social interaction. On their journey to the Peckham almshouses in *The Secret Agent*, Winnie and her mother have to shout above the noisy cab in order to converse. However, the presence and proximity of the driver, and the taking of a private journey, at least allowed for the kind of social engagement denied by, for example, sitting amongst the crowd on an underground train. If you could see a mass of people, but not hear them as individuals, that was inevitably an isolating experience. As Simmel argued in 1912, seeing without hearing could cause more

³⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Man of the Crowd', in *Selected Writings of Edgar Allen Poe*, ed. by David Galloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp.179-188 (p.183).

³⁶ See Thacker, p.91.

anxiety than hearing without seeing: he asserts that ‘This principle is of great importance in understanding the sociology of the modern city’.³⁷

While, as Ford observed, only tramps and gypsies seemed to walk into London, walking around it was the habit of the modern *flâneur*. However, this figure, as Benjamin notes, was more readily associated with Paris than with London.³⁸ The *flâneur* was also typically an observer, rather than a listener: a ‘passionate spectator’, as Baudelaire describes in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863).³⁹ As I will discuss further below, listening implies a more participatory process than observation. Hearing is also the sense which is arguably better suited than sight to the ‘teeming protean life of the city’, to use Steven Connor’s terms, as an urban environment demands the flexibility of an auditory consciousness to make sense of the shifting and multi-directional rush of impressions.⁴⁰

Benjamin identifies the street boy and the sandwich-board man as London’s equivalents of the *flâneur*.⁴¹ However, London’s true *flâneurs* were arguably its *émigré* writers, newcomers to the city like Conrad, Henry James and Crane. Less well attuned to London’s soundscape than its indigenous population, such writers were arguably better placed to represent the city in their fiction, and to discern those factors which made it sound different. In the Author’s Note to *The Secret Agent*, Conrad recalls his wanderings around the London streets and makes plain the impact of the ensuing flood of impressions on his imagination: ‘I had to

³⁷ Georg Simmel (1912), *Mélanges de philosophie relativiste: Contribution à la culture philosophique*. Quoted by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press, 1999), p.433.

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn; ed. and introduced by Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), p.168.

³⁹ Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in *The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995), p.9.

⁴⁰ Steven Connor, ‘The Modern Auditory Eye’ in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 203-23(pp.209-10). See also David Frisby who calls for ‘*flânerie*’ to be explored as an auditory process in *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.28.

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, p.169 and *The Arcades Project*, p.451.

fight hard to keep at arms-length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story' (7).

In addition to the aural changes noted above, the newly emerging sound technologies also impacted on the soundscape. Conrad first arrived in London in 1878, a year after Edison's phonograph had first been patented, and a year before the city had its first telephone exchange. A decade later, the first gramophones would begin to change the experience of music forever. The ubiquity of the advertising image; magic shows and the development of early cinema; streets newly illuminated by electricity; visual displays of consumerism in shop windows; and, of course, modern newsprint, had all contributed to the growth of what was increasingly perceived as a modern urban 'spectacle'. Stephen Donovan has explored the influence of these on Conrad's work, in the context of visual entertainment, tourism, advertising and magazine fiction.⁴² However, apart from Ivan Kreilkamp's study of the 'phonographic voice' in *Heart of Darkness* the impact of auditory change has yet to be considered.⁴³

Through focusing on the city soundscape, this study will extend the exploration of Conrad's London undertaken by the articles in *Conrad's Cities* where sounds are alluded to but not explored.⁴⁴ Conrad's narrative technique will not be discussed in detail in this study. However, his aural impressions need to be located within his famous aesthetic statement, which so clearly equates hearing with feeling, and to be linked with the writer's creation of a sensual 'atmosphere'.

⁴² See Stephen Donovan, *Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴³ Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁴⁴ *Conrad's Cities: Essays for Hans van Marle*, ed. by Gene M. Moore (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992).

Sound and the temporal-spatial atmosphere

In the Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Conrad expresses the importance of fiction's appeal to the reader's senses, through creating 'the moral, the emotional atmosphere of the place and time' (ix). The famous statement which follows: 'to make you hear, to make you feel [...] before all, to make you *see*' (x) is generally interpreted as a conflation of seeing with knowing, rather than the privileging of one sense impression over another. Discussions of Conrad's technique acknowledge that his impressionism extends far beyond the visual. As Ian Watt has noted, 'For Conrad, the world of the senses is not a picture but a presence'.⁴⁵ Elsewhere, Con Coroneos writes of a 'thickness' between the subject and object in Conrad's work, which suggests that the representation of this presence may derive from a depth to the impressions.⁴⁶ In similar vein, John G. Peters notes that Conrad's impressionism represents 'both surface and depth'.⁴⁷ Such discussions ignore the role that aural impressions play in establishing that extra dimension of 'being there' which cannot be achieved by visual impressions alone. As Jacques Berthoud argues, Conrad's statement should be read as a 'seamless process that starts with the senses and ends with the mind', within which hearing, feeling, and sight are all associative of knowing.⁴⁸

As Martin Jay has discussed, the association between seeing and knowing can be traced back to the Greek philosophers.⁴⁹ Aristotle identifies sight as the 'superior sense' for 'supplying the primary wants of

⁴⁵ Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), p.179.

⁴⁶ Con Coroneos, *Space, Conrad and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.112.

⁴⁷ John G. Peters, *Conrad and Impressionism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.33.

⁴⁸ Jacques Berthoud, 'The Preface', *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, ed. by Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 175-182 (p.181).

⁴⁹ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994).

life’ but locates hearing as the sense which best develops intelligence, due to its role in discourse and the use of the word as ‘thought symbol’.⁵⁰ Conversely, it is arguably sight which allows for the focus, attention and control necessary to theorize about the world and to ‘reflect’ on that knowledge.⁵¹ Connor suggests that this may be ascribed to the fixity of the eye, that is to say its focus on what is immediately perceptible within its field of vision; this, Connor notes, is generally presumed as the physiological basis for an association of seeing with knowing.⁵² As Aristotle’s account in ‘On Sense and the Sensible’ suggests, sight had, therefore, an intrinsic cognitive utility, insofar as it allowed for the concentration and control necessary for day-to-day living. In *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry, and Meteorology*, Descartes addresses this notion of utility, in the context of the new optical technologies of his age:

All the management of our lives depends on the senses, and since that of sight is the most comprehensive and the noblest of these, there is no doubt that the inventions which serve to augment its power are among the most useful that there can be.⁵³

Inventions which offered an auditory ‘perspective’ on the world developed, of course, long after the technologies of surveying and mapping. While the ‘landscape’ could be measured and mapped in objective terms, therefore, the perception of noise in the soundscape was, until the development of sound recording, reliant purely on the type of subjective feeling traditionally associated with music. The relative lack of scientific interest in systematically ‘mapping’ ambient sound may be attributable to this: it is notable that the British Library’s ‘Sound Map’ was

⁵⁰ Aristotle, ‘On Sense and the Sensible’, Section 1, Part 1, trans. by J.I. Beare in *The Internet Classics Archive* <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/sense/htm>> [accessed 16 February 2013].

⁵¹ As Jay notes (p.23), the meaning of ‘theory’ (‘to look at attentively, to behold’) expresses this link between vision and powers of analysis.

⁵² Steven Connor, ‘Feel the Noise: Excess, Affect and the Acoustic’, in *Emotion in Postmodernism*, (Vol. 74), ed. by Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1997), pp.147-62 (p.148).

⁵³ Quoted by Jay, p.21.

established some 130 years after Edison first invented the means to record the everyday sounds around us.

Connor contrasts the ‘fixity’ of sight with the ‘plurality’ of hearing: sound, in its dependency on the action of one object against another, can never be singular.⁵⁴ The plurality of sound impressions gives these an intrinsic depth which visual impressions lack and the duration of a sound normally makes more of an impact on us than the duration of a visual impression, which may seem static (like the view of a ‘landscape’), or will eventually move beyond the frame of our vision unless we change position. We can, of course, hear what we cannot see, hear through walls and around street corners, and hear across spaces that are beyond the range of our normal vision. A sound may often be heard before its source becomes apparent and its meaning can be ascertained. Indeed, sound impressions often require a ‘delayed decoding’, the term first used by Watt in *Conrad and the Nineteenth Century* to describe a recurring feature of Conrad’s narrative technique.⁵⁵ In the context of this technique, Peters contrasts ‘primitive perception’ with ‘civilized perception’, to describe how Conrad’s characters often experience an initial sense impression, which is followed by the ‘civilizing’ process of the cognition of meaning.⁵⁶ Peters argues that Conrad ‘emphasizes primitive perception in his works in order to demonstrate that all phenomena filter through human consciousness’ and that incidences of this occur as part of the process of ‘delayed decoding’.⁵⁷ Peters offers many examples of this and it is notable that some of these involve sound impressions, which implicitly categorizes these as a form of instinctual (primitive) perception. However, as I will

⁵⁴ Connor, ‘Feel the Noise: Excess, Affect and the Acoustic’, in *Emotion in Postmodernism*, ed. by Hoffman and Hornung, p.149.

⁵⁵ See Watt, p.175.

⁵⁶ Peters, p.37.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

illustrate by examples in a later section in this Introduction, Conrad's sound impressions cannot be generalized in this way; instead, they demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the listening process.

The manner in which audition allows us to experience a space before we see it is interesting to consider in the context of modern London. As Henri Lefebvre argues, 'Space is listened for [...] as much as seen, and heard before it comes into view'.⁵⁸ The winding streets of the ancient city obscured the view ahead, while new and wide thoroughfares offered a quite different perspective. The 'early-modern' Londoner needed to rely on ear impressions to know what was around the corners of the winding alleyways. In contrast, the modern Londoner had a clearer view. Peter Brooker describes how late nineteenth-century London was designed to be a visually impressive city; this was exemplified by new roads such as Kingsway in Holborn.⁵⁹ As the 'vision' of the civic planners, such a road was a 'represented space', in Lefebvre's terms, insofar as it materialized a highly theorized topography, which had been planned with a mission to create a suitably imperial-*looking* city.⁶⁰ In the 'On the Pavement' episode of *Chance* (1914), the East India Dock Road's 'broad, interminable perspective' and 'great perspective' nevertheless has a 'spacious meanness of aspect' (153), which thus becomes ironically linked with the poverty of its inhabitants. Coroneos has commented that the figurative view in Conrad's work is 'often obstructive, partial, or blurred', leading to a 'denigration of the visual'.⁶¹ To extend that reading, Conrad also engages with the specifics of the London topography, in terms which mock this new urban confidence in a visual perspective.

⁵⁸ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp.199-200.

⁵⁹ Brooker, p.5.

⁶⁰ Lefebvre, p.38.

⁶¹ Coroneos, p.112.

The multi-dimensional nature of hearing and its power to disrupt temporal and spatial perceptions arguably inform auditory impressions with a flexibility which makes them particularly well suited to expressing the multi-directional nature of life in a modern city.⁶² Due to the association of hearing with subjective experience, a city described as heard is more explicitly a city felt. Stefan Haag has discussed Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) in this context, drawing on Schafer's identification of the contrast between the 'listener', who is always located in the middle of a soundscape, and the 'observer' (lacking eyes in the back of his / her head) who is of necessity always looking forwards from the margins of their urban landscape.⁶³ Haag discusses how this process of 'centring' takes place in the 'Wandering Rocks' episode of *Ulysses* whereby the materially noisy city of Dublin is expressed through Joyce's sound impressionism, which places both his characters and his readers in the middle of an aural urban space. Haag's argument that Joyce has expressed how 'hearing manifests itself as receptivity, sensibility itself' is especially pertinent to a discussion of Conrad's aesthetics.⁶⁴ Conrad's sound impressions work to create a temporal and spatial 'atmosphere' and these are underpinned by a topographical clarity which, as Robert Hampson has argued, represent a 'spatialization of Conrad's visual memory'.⁶⁵ To extend this reading, such a spatialization is informed by Conrad's auditory impressions, as this was a city with which he was very familiar.

⁶² In the post-modern period, this is no longer quite the case, of course: auditory technologies like the I-pod allow us to 'shuffle' acoustic experience into a desired order and temporality and to create a private auditory space.

⁶³ Stefan Haag, 'Listen and be touched: Aural Space in "Wandering Rocks"', in Joyce's *Wandering Rocks*, ed. by Andrew Gibson and Steven Morrison (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp.107-20. Maud Ellman also discusses sound in Joyce's work in 'Joyce's Noises', *Modernism/Modernity*, 16:2 (2009), 383-90.

⁶⁴ Haag, p.118.

⁶⁵ Robert Hampson, "'Topographical Mysteries': Conrad's London", in *Conrad's Cities*, ed. by Moore, pp.159-74 (p.174).

The ‘thing grown up not made’ and ‘Somebody’s gardens, a Crescent’: Conrad’s London from East to West

Conrad first experienced the distinctiveness of London’s topography in June 1878. In ‘Poland Revisited’ (1915), he recalls that after arriving in Lowestoft on the *Mavis*, he set off for London where he encountered the city’s defining jumble of the mappable and the maze: ‘charted and navigable streets’, combined with ‘hidden’ courts and byways (*NLL* 122). In this period, as Hugh Epstein has discussed, London was a city with which Conrad would have already been familiar from Dickens, as a place of confined, topographically private spaces, each with an aural quality of their own.⁶⁶

Enclosed spaces were especially prevalent in the Docks area, which were protected by mighty gates: Home Office Records for 1909 number these at an astonishing 114.⁶⁷ ‘Young Powell’ encounters these in *Chance*. He reaches the ‘large iron gates in a dead wall’, firmly ‘closed and locked’ (23), from where he can hear the footsteps of an enclosed world ‘echoing between the walls of the warehouses as if in an uninhabited town of very high buildings dark from basement to roof’ (24). Conrad’s own experience of ‘sailor’s London’, to use Hampson’s term, would have left a lasting impression of this sense of confinement.⁶⁸ The imagery of this appears in Conrad’s essay ‘The Faithful River’ (1904). There Conrad contrasts the open quays of Antwerp, Nantes, Bordeaux and Rouen with London’s ‘forest’, an ‘impenetrable’ built environment like the ‘silent depths of an

⁶⁶ Hugh Epstein, ‘A Pier-Glass in the Tavern: London and *The Secret Agent*’, in *Conrad’s Cities*, ed. by Moore, pp.175-96.

⁶⁷ London, National Archives, Policing of the London Docks – Arrangements with the Port of London Authority, 1892-1910, Home Office Registered Papers and Minutes: 19 November 1909, HO 45/10429/A54002.

⁶⁸ Hampson, “Topographical Mysteries”, p.170.

unexplored wilderness' (*MoS* 107). Each ship seems like a 'prisoner' and the 'slight grinding noise of the wooden fenders makes a sound of angry muttering' (*MoS* 110). Conrad hears London's archetypal 'hum' in the Docks: in this case, it is the sound of 'men's work' which 'fills the river with a menacing, muttering note' (*MoS* 106). As I will discuss in Chapter 1, the sound of London's commerce clearly made an impact on Conrad's auditory imagination.

The Docks were, to some extent, a randomly constructed environment, 'grown up, not made', as Conrad describes (*MoS* 107). At the same time, they also typified a city of discrete auditory 'territories', which had their own 'localized' noises, as Jacques Attali terms these.⁶⁹ Attali writes of the relationship between sound and power, and this can be discerned in the history of the Docks. While these developed in a random fashion, they also gave material expression to the power of a controlling organization, in this case, of the dock companies. Debates about whether the Docks were a 'public' or 'private' space had been recurring since the early-1800s.⁷⁰ In *Chance*, Powell encounters both the 'ruffians' who preyed on sailors, and a policeman who is charged with protecting the area. The issue of policing had arisen again in 1909, as Conrad may have been aware, and the newly established Port of London Authority sent a deputation to Gladstone to demand that improvements be made.⁷¹ Such a 'gated community', to use a twentieth-first century comparison, typified a city aware of the need to protect the commercial worth of its goods. More broadly, the Docks

⁶⁹ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p.6

⁷⁰ See Ivan S. Greeve, *London Docks: A Civil Engineering History* (London: Thomas Telford, 1980). See also Glyn Hardwicke, *Keepers of the Door: The History of the Port of London Police* (London: privately printed by Peel Press, u.d., available in the Museum in Docklands Library, London). The goods at the East India Dock had originally been handled on open quays, but fears of theft soon led to the high security walls being constructed in the early-1800s. Between 1840-1866, the Docks were patrolled by the Metropolitan Police; since 1866, the dock companies had had their own force.

⁷¹ Policing of the London Docks, Home Office Minutes: 24 November 1909, HO 45/10429/A54022.

typified an imperial city in which there was increasing debate about the use of public spaces, especially for the ancient practice of social dissent. At the other end of London, the carefully-planned West End square with its surrounding gardens and crescents, as represented in 'The Return' (1898), also offered a discrete auditory experience in a territorialized city whose streets and open spaces were increasingly 'charted' and figuratively 'spoken for'.

Conrad's fictional London was informed by his personal experience, which encompassed shore-based periods while he was on leave as a sailor, his early years developing a writing career, and his later success as a 'man about town', living in Kent but frequently visiting London on business.⁷² As is consistent with such familiarity, the perambulations of Conrad's Londoners tend to be spatially and temporally locatable. At the beginning of 'The Return' for example, we read of Alvan Hervey's clear route home from a West End station every evening, while in *The Secret Agent*, Verloc's route from Brett Street in Soho to the Russian Embassy in Belgravia is easily traced. Similarly, *Chance* provides a whole episode which is precisely located on the East India Dock Road. In lieu of contemporary sound recordings, such specificity assists the recovery of the soundscape of different districts, in a period when increased noise was the subject of much concern.

⁷² Allan H. Simmons provides a useful enumeration of Conrad's different addresses during his early years in London: Tollington Park, near Finsbury Park; Dynevor Road, Stoke Newington; Bessborough Gardens, Pimlico; and Gillingham Street near Victoria Station. See *Reader's Companion to Conrad*, ed. by Owen Knowles and Gene Moore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.208-10.

Noise and the ‘nervous age’

By the late-Victorian era, as Conrad began his writing career, the notion that a quieter London was a better London was well established. Such was the ideal driving organizations like the ‘Association for the Suppression of Street Noises’, whose campaigns are widely reported in *The Times* in the late-1890s. These continued a process which had been on-going since the 1860s, when the mathematician Charles Babbage made his well-documented protests about the noise of the barrel-organ grinders. This had culminated in a petition to Parliament in 1864, led by Charles Dickens.⁷³ Dickens’s own protests appear to have been driven by a combination of intellectual and artistic self-interest, combined with an expressed need to protect undisturbed private spaces for those working to the greater public good. Others, however, used it as an opportunity to give vent to contemporary prejudices about nationality and class. The organ-grinders were predominantly Italian and German in origin and therefore easy to cast as the noisy ‘foreigners’; the sound (‘noise’) of the barrel organ (often accompanied by spontaneous dancing) was a traditionally popular feature of working-class life, but not categorized as ‘music’ (‘sound’) for those possessing, or aspiring to, middle- and upper-class tastes. In Peter Bailey’s terms, reactions to the noise of Victorian England thereby express a ‘continuing struggle between refinement and vulgarity’ which typified the cultural mores of the period and which was especially played out on the streets of London.⁷⁴

⁷³ Included with other reports and correspondence in Michael T. Bass, *Street Music in the Metropolis* (London: Murray, 1864).

⁷⁴ Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.31. As Karin Bijsterveld has explored, there were similar anti-noise campaigns in Europe and the USA. See ‘The Diabolical Symphony of the Mechanical Age: Technology and Symbolism of Sound in European and North American Noise Abatement Campaigns, 1900-1940’ in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, ed. by Michael Bull and Les Back (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp.165-89.

While in acoustic terms, as discussed above, modernity might bring with it new manifestations of quietude, this era was popularly assumed to be much noisier. At a time of increasing scientific knowledge about the acoustic properties of tone and rhythm, noise was the subject of more informed scrutiny. As Schafer discusses, noise is generally defined as sound which is unmusical or loud and impressions of noise as unwanted sound have been traced back to 1225.⁷⁵ Hermann Helmholtz's *On the Sensations of Tone*, first published in 1877 and revised over the following decades, was a seminal text which disseminated awareness of such distinctions.⁷⁶ Helmholtz contrasts the periodic and uniform tones of music with the irregularity of noises, giving as an example the rattling of a carriage over granite paving stones.⁷⁷ The 'atrocious jolting and uproarious jingling' (127) of the Verlocs' cab typifies such an effect: while repetitive, the sounds are discordant and there is a 'disproportionate violence and magnitude' (126) which seems to propel the occupants up and down rather than forwards.

Helmholtz's work provides a fascinating reminder of the interest in acoustics at this time, as theorists negotiated the inherently unnerving borderland between the new objectivities of science and the subjectivities of art. Aesthetic expression and subjective experience (as exemplified by the creation and audition of music) should not be sullied by conscious design and awareness of technique, in Helmholtz's view. He asserts the value of pure aestheticism against conscious technique, in a statement which has much in common with the ideas behind Conrad's Preface: 'A work of art, known and acknowledged as the product of mere intelligence, will never be accepted as a work of art, however perfect be

⁷⁵ Schafer, p.182.

⁷⁶ Hermann Helmholtz, *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music*, trans. by Alexander J. Ellis, 4th edn (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1912).

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.7.

its adaptation in the end'.⁷⁸ *On the Sensations of Tone* ruminates about the qualities which make a sound 'musical' ; a translator's revision (which seems to date from the 1885 edition) notes, for example, that a 'clang' has a degree of harshness to it, which makes it a noise rather than a musical tone.⁷⁹

While there is no evidence that Conrad read Helmholtz's work, his first-hand experience of the sounds of steam and sail would have made such auditory distinctions clear. In 'Cobwebs and Gossamers' (1905), Conrad suggests that the steamship had its own rhythm, but this is of an 'iron heart', the 'clang' of which is inevitably out of tune with the surrounding elements:

The modern steamship advances upon a still and overshadowed sea with a pulsating tremor of her frame, an occasional clang in her depths, as if she had an iron heart in her iron body; with a thudding rhythm in her progress and the regular beat of her propeller, heard afar in the night with an august and plodding sound as of the march of an inevitable future. But in a gale, the silent machinery of a sailing-ship would catch not only the power, but the wild and exulting voice of the world's soul. (*MoS* 38)

Conrad goes on to describe the musical nature of the sail-ship's progress in a gale, likening the sound to an 'invisible orchestra', the 'weird effects' of which 'would get upon a man's nerves till he wished himself deaf' (*MoS* 38). The potential of sound to upset psychological well-being was becoming increasingly widely recognized, although it was, of course, the newer sounds which were perceived to be the greater problem. During the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian period, the irritation level of noise was no doubt increased by advances in the nascent understanding of its physiological and psychological ill effects – reinforced by the presence of a rapidly expanding popular press to disseminate information

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.366.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.24n.

about this. What had long troubled a privileged élite like Carlyle, Babbage and Dickens was now a commonplace concern. Out on the city's streets, the noise of Conrad's London may well have been enhanced by the co-existence of different forms of transport, as the corporeally noisy horse competed for space with the motorized bus and car. A 1906 column about 'The Nervous Age' in the *Illustrated London News* notes that doctors were writing to Parliament about the 'injurious effects on the nervous system produced by the excessive noise of our streets', connecting this to the 'excessive strain, worry, noise and turmoil of city life' and to wider concerns, in Nordau's wake, about 'degeneration'.⁸⁰ Such comments recall that the distracting effect of the city could be allied to auditory as much as visual experience.

The listening point of view and the point of listening

Finally, the notion of a modern sound, whether noisy or subdued, raises questions about the definition of a modern listener. A sound that has no individually discernible notes cannot, of course, be heard in a meaningful way. It may function as a background (as in the case of muzak) but it defies cognition, as the producing source has been masked and distorted. The peals of a church bell exemplify a 'traditional' sound in this context, as these have a clearly communicative function in temporal and spatial terms. As Alain Corbin has explored in the context of nineteenth-century rural France, the sound range of the church bell delineated territories and defined communities of listeners.⁸¹ Through his career at sea and travels

⁸⁰ 'The Nervous Age', *Illustrated London News*, 25 August 1906, p.262. James G. Mansell's study of urban auditory culture includes an analysis of medical discourse about the effects of noise during this period. See 'Sounds Modern: Perils and Possibilities in the Audible Metropolis, 1889-1937' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Manchester, 2008).

⁸¹ Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

in Africa and Asia, Conrad would have become familiar with similar types of traditional sounds which were imbued with specific meanings and significance. Conrad's general interest in the function of sounds is recollected by Jacob Epstein: 'Of music he said he knew nothing, nor did it interest him; but he admitted being impressed by the sound of drums coming across the waters in Africa at night'.⁸² This interest is evident in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) where Marlow ruminates about the drum rolls in the Congo that these sounds may have as 'profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country' (61).

Truax's differentiations are useful in this context. He identifies three levels of listening, which depend on how much attention we pay to the sounds. These are: 'listening-in-search', 'listening-in-readiness', and 'background listening'.⁸³ The first of these is especially associated with the type of participative listening required before the modern era, and in rural / traditional societies, where survival may depend on listening attentively to search for aural clues in our environment. This type of listening is especially pertinent to Conrad's experience at sea, where, in the days before sonar detection devices, it was clearly essential to immediately understand what the sounds signified.⁸⁴ In 'Cobwebs and Gossamers', Conrad describes how he first became aware of the importance of hearing at sea, having travelled with a chief mate who was hard of hearing, and thereby unable to judge such crucial factors as the weight of the wind (*MoS* 38-9). In contrast to this, 'listening-in-

⁸² Quoted in *Joseph Conrad: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by Martin Ray (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp.168-71 (p.170).

⁸³ Truax, p.22.

⁸⁴ Sonar detection was developed in the First World War, when the 'hydrophone' was used to detect German U-boats. In his essay 'The Unlighted Coast' (1917), Conrad describes his experience (in 1916) on-board a British 'Q-ship', which was designed to detect and destroy German submarines. While Conrad makes no reference to this form of sonar detection (he describes an 'enemy submarine seen off the coast'), his account of the land 'talking' through the medium of wired messages to the ship indicates the increasingly important role played by new technology (*LE* 38).

readiness' is more allied to modern experience in that our attention can be safely focused elsewhere: when we are waiting for the telephone to ring, for example, or hear the remote sound of a car or house alarm. Finally, 'background listening' is that habitual process by which we are aware of ambient sounds but have become so attuned to them that we pay little or no attention, as in the case of noisy traffic, which we may not consciously 'hear' at all. This last form of listening is particularly associative of an urban environment, as impressions of London's 'background' attest. In his essay 'Stephen Crane' (1923), Conrad describes this type of sensual experience in his recollection of a long walk around London with Crane in October 1897 when both men were so engrossed in their discussions about life and literature that they barely saw or heard the surrounding city.

In 'Typhoon' (1903), Captain MacWhirr typifies the traditionally participatory maritime listener, whose 'strained, listening attention' allows him (unlike the auditorially-challenged chief mate of Conrad's recollection) to hear the 'weight' (37) of the oncoming storm. Conrad's awareness of the perceptive depth offered by auditory impressions is especially apparent in this story. At first, MacWhirr hears a 'loud noise' (35) after which he perceives its constituent keynotes: the 'splash and patter' of the drops of water, and a 'whistling', which is audible above the 'deep vibrating noise outside' (36). Significantly, MacWhirr uses these sounds to acquire knowledge about the nature of the storm; he is able to hear, to feel, and, most importantly, to see, that is, to know and understand, what the noises portend:

Its increase filled his ears while he was getting ready to go out and confront *whatever it might mean*. It was tumultuous and very loud – made up of the rush of the wind, the crashes of the sea, with that

prolonged deep vibration of the air, like the roll of an immense and remote drum beating the charge of the gale. (36-7; emphasis added)

This episode exemplifies the manner in which this story's wider themes are 'stormed by the aesthetic', to use Cedric Watts's term, and such aural impressionism clearly expresses that combination of hearing and feeling for which Conrad aimed.⁸⁵ MacWhirr is in the centre of his soundscape and he rejects the seaman's manual, which expresses the storm from a visual and theoretical perspective:

He lost himself amongst advancing semi-circles, left- and right-hand quadrants, the curves of the tracks, the probable bearing of the centre, the shifts of wind and the readings of barometer. (32-33)

The modernity of the manual lies in its ordering and control and the idea that the natural elements can be mastered by a strategy. MacWhirr dismisses the 'headwork' of a manual, which would place him on the auditory margins, not participating with the sounds of the storm, but always at a step behind; as he tells Jukes: 'If a fellow was to believe all that's in there, he would be running most of his time all over the sea trying to get behind the weather' (33). MacWhirr wants to be at the centre of an auditory experience, through both listening to and participating in the storm.

MacWhirr's auditory engagement with his environment can be contrasted with the detachment of other, more modern, listeners in Conrad's *œuvre*. In *Nostromo* (1904), the acoustics of the San Tomé mine are as carefully evoked as the sounds of the storm in 'Typhoon': the 'rattle' of the ore shoots builds to a 'great clattering, shuffling noise, gathering speed and weight'; this echoes off the gorge walls onto the plain 'in a growl of thunder' (104). The local innkeeper, 'by listening

⁸⁵ Cedric Watts, 'Introduction', *Typhoon and Other Tales*, ed. by Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. xi-xxxiii (p.xiv).

intently', hears the mine's noises as a natural sound, 'as of a storm in the mountains' (105). However, Gould's listening is characterized by 'fancy' and 'imagination':

He had heard this desire. He had heard this very sound in his imagination on that far-off evening when his wife and himself, after a tortuous ride through a strip of forest, had reined in their horses near the stream, and had gazed first time upon the jungle-grown solitude of the gorge. (105)

For Gould, the sounds of the mine are not rooted in acoustic reality, but in an intangible dream, an idea of material progress and acquisition which Conrad expresses as an 'audacious desire' (105). The reactions of Mrs Gould are similar: the 'rattle' of the first wagon of ore is 'heard with a thrill of thankful emotion' (107).

Fredric Jameson has argued that auditory impressions take on a new primacy in *Nostromo* and that this is a novel in which Conrad foregrounds the experience of perception itself.⁸⁶ The senses thus take on a significance within the novel's thematic content, rather than as part of its narrative form. However, while he rightly foregrounds this novel's auditory impressions, Jameson misses the associations made by Conrad between listening and character. Just as MacWhirr's auditory experience of the storm is associative of his reluctance to theorize about the natural elements, for example, Gould's audition of the mine is influenced by his consciousness of personal ambition. Jameson suggests that Conrad presents the 'new ideal of an auditory image', which contests the 'passively inherited apparatus of a purely visual impressionism'.⁸⁷ However, Conrad's auditory images are attenuated both to the tone of the narration, and to the character of the 'listeners'. This is apparent in the

⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1983), pp.227-31.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.228.

episode where the railway company's chief engineer awaits the chairman of the railway board, which Jameson cites as an example of the novel's 'textual apparatus', through which 'auditory perceptions of a peculiarly pure type' are registered.⁸⁸ However, these impressions are not 'pure'; instead, they highlight the contrasting characters of the chief engineer and the chairman, Sir John. For example, despite the pragmatic need to have his ears at the ready to 'catch the first sound' of Sir John's arrival by stage-coach, the engineer lets his imagination roam and finds himself impressed by the 'changing hues' of the scenery which he likens to an 'inspired piece of music' (40). Sir John arrives 'too late to hear the magnificent and inaudible strain sung by the sunset amongst the high peaks of the Sierra' (40) but the ironic tone of the third-person narration has already suggested that he might not, in any case, have much of an ear for nature. Earlier, the narration has parenthetically noted that Sir John is 'from London' (35) and he is characterized as a 'man of affairs', confident that a hostile natural world 'can always be overcome by the resources of finance' (39).

Gould is another example of a man for whom the perception of sounds is bound up in notions of territorial possession: 'To Charles Gould's fancy it seemed that the sound must reach the uttermost limits of the province' (105). Having described the acoustics of the gorge through the authorial narrative, Conrad shifts the listening point to Gould. The sound's audition across the plain is, according to the authorial narrative, an acoustic fact; its extension to the limits of the province is, of course, only a *feeling* on Gould's part, fuelled by an auditory self-confidence in the sounds of his ambition, which take on the 'peculiar force of a proclamation' (105).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

Gould owns the mine and he owns its sounds which become emblematic of the extent of his influence.

The type of auditory appropriations which Conrad expressed through Gould can be located within Europe's colonial project to territorialize and modernize. In Gould's dismissive response to the spontaneous music-making of the Costaguanerans can be heard this sense of auditory entitlement. The 'resonant twanging of harp strings, the sharp ping of guitars, with the grave drumming throb of an Indian bombo' are brought to a textual halt by Gould's statement that 'All this piece of land belongs now to the Railway Company. There will be no more popular feasts held here' (123). Thus Gould brings to Sulaco the attitudes which influenced the social-acoustics of late-Victorian London, in which noisy displays of public (street) entertainment were associated with the city's poor and noisy past, and public space was increasingly being subjected to different forms of control. In Sulaco, the new regime is clear: the Railway Company are exerting their control and bringing a spirit of subdued modernity. Captain Mitchell's observation about Sulaco's Plaza is an indication of London's influence: 'The Plaza. I call it magnificent. Twice the area of Trafalgar Square' (467). London provides the measure for other cities, and as Berthoud argues, Sulaco can be located as the 'urban prototype of the Empire of the Indies'.⁸⁹

Berthoud briefly discusses the auditory contrast between old and new Sulaco, but this deserves more attention than he allows. He notes of Decoud's impression of the train outside the city gates, for example, that we 'see what Decoud sees' and 'see him seeing it'.⁹⁰ However, it is Decoud's auditory response to the idea of the new that is most powerful.

⁸⁹ Jacques Berthoud, 'The Modernization of Sulaco', in *Conrad's Cities*, ed. by Moore, pp.139-157 (p.157).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.141.

Decoud (who, like Marlow, may be characterized as one of Conrad's attentive listeners) ruminates on the 'explosive noise of the railway trucks,' which he associates with the sound of trumpets in Drake's time: 'to return to my noises; there used to be in the old days the sound of trumpets outside that gate' (173). Decoud comments that the 'noise outside the city wall is new, but the principle is old' (173) thus expressing Conrad's interest in the cultural and historical significance of sound. Both the noisy modern locomotive and Drake's trumpets express the sound of imperial speculation. Here Decoud makes auditory comparisons, which, as this thesis will argue, recur in Conrad's representation of London.

In *Nostromo*, Conrad also alludes to the notion of European listening: the narrator ironically describes the 'barbarous and imposing noise of the big drum' in Sulaco, which 'even Europeans cannot hear without a strange emotion' (126). Ironically, Edison's phonograph would bring more time for that highly attentive mode of listening which could begin to make hitherto unexplored distinctions between different styles of listening, and start to apply an objective framework to a sense previously surrounded by abstraction and subjectivity. As Eric Ames discusses, the phonograph offered opportunities for research alongside entertainment.⁹¹ In particular, the phonograph allowed for a more objective and scientific form of listening which could be utilized to capture sounds from the colonies. A longstanding European interest in non-Western musical forms (or, more typically, the perceived lack of these) was, by the turn of the century, transmuted into the scientific discipline of comparative musicology, and its successor ethnomusicology. Between 1900-1912, as Ames describes, German researchers in these fields made a series of sound recordings of the travelling music shows in Berlin, capturing and

⁹¹ Eric Ames, 'The Sound of Evolution', *Modernism/Modernity*, 10:2 (2003), 297-325.

analysing traditional music from across Asia and Africa.⁹² In addition to gaining a greater understanding of the music itself (that repeated listening now allowed for), the researchers developed an understanding of ‘psycho-acoustics’: the process by which aural responses are individualized and the resultant effect on sound perception. Cultural conditioning, for example, was found to be an important influencing factor in the perception of sounds like those of the traditional drum. It should not be forgotten that the type of visual stereotyping of the ‘savage’ which appeared in late-Victorian publications had an aural counterpart. Those who listened with ‘European ears’, as Ames describes, were used to Western conventions of harmonic form, and thereby likely to dismiss African and Asian music as mere ‘noise’, an attitude displayed back home to the unwanted sound of the foreign organ-grinders on the London streets.⁹³

As Kreilkamp notes, the phonograph was first commercially available in Great Britain in 1898, and was being widely advertised as Conrad began work on *Heart of Darkness* in the December of that year.⁹⁴ Kreilkamp argues that this novel is ‘Edison-haunted’, and that although the ‘talking machine’ does not appear in the novel, Conrad’s representation of Kurtz suggests the disembodied sound of the phonograph.⁹⁵ Marlow cannot visualize Kurtz as a physical presence, instead, he imagines him as a man of speech, not action. According to Kreilkamp’s reading, Kurtz’s voice is thereby ‘disembodied’, in the manner of the phonograph. In this context, Kreilkamp also discusses the decline of an oral tradition where experiences were traditionally shared in the corporeal companionship of a group of listeners – as enjoyed, of

⁹² Ibid. The research was led by Carl Stumpf, the founder (in 1900) of the Berlin Phonogram Archive.

⁹³ Ibid, p.306.

⁹⁴ See Kreilkamp, p.193.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.201.

course, by Marlow and his companions on the *Nellie* in *Heart of Darkness*. In 'The Storyteller', Benjamin describes the process by which this traditional figure became 'remote' and 'distant' to the modern world, as the rise of the novel led to readers engaging in isolation with the printed word.⁹⁶ 'Experience', as expressed by word of mouth from storyteller to listener, was thereby devalued, a process compounded by the 'information'-driven world, which the modern newspaper epitomized. Kreilkamp locates Marlow, who is experienced by his listeners at one point in *Heart of Darkness* as 'no more to us than a voice' (70), within this modern phenomenon. In his role as the story-teller, Kreilkamp argues, Marlow is thus similarly disembodied, and his presence in the text thereby expresses the decline of a traditional literary figure.

However, to associate Marlow with Benjamin's 'story-teller' is to mythologize an urbane and modern figure, especially as Conrad characterizes his narrator in *Chance*. Marlow is also portrayed by Conrad as listener as much as 'teller'. He has a sharp ear for contemporary idiom, recalling, for example, that the Company's Chief Accountant used phrases such as 'to get a breath of fresh air' which sounded 'wonderfully odd' (59) and more suited to an office existence. He also recalls the Manager of the Central Station's utilization of the 'commonest phrase' (63). While the influence of the telegraph is made explicit in this novella through the sign which Marlow encounters on the way to the Inner Station, it is arguable how much Conrad intended us to hear Kurtz's voice as phonographic. Firstly, the representation of this would probably have been much more detailed and developed than the allusions to its 'stream' and 'flow', which Kreilkamp offers as evidence of the

⁹⁶ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, p.83.

phonograph's influence.⁹⁷ Furthermore, after Kurtz's death, a journalist makes explicit reference to Marlow about his former colleague's oratorical skills, commenting 'how that man could talk! He electrified large meetings' and going on to remark that Kurtz could have been 'a splendid leader of an extreme party' (120). Such an observation readily locates Kurtz with a character like Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, that is to say someone for whom voice, in the traditional sense, was a prized asset. Kurtz's cousin tells Marlow that Kurtz could have been a 'great musician', but Marlow more shrewdly locates him in the culturally indeterminate world of the professional dabbler in popular journalism and 'art': 'I had taken him for a painter who wrote for the papers, or else for a journalist who could paint' (120). Kurtz is thereby diminished but not disembodied. Artistically, Kurtz is nothing 'great' at all, rather, as one of the superficial 'speechifiers' of populist politics, he is a recognizably urban figure.

Chapter 1 begins by exploring that world of meeting-hall, street corner and park, where the populist orators of the day competed to influence public opinion, alongside the first truly popular newspapers. The chapter focuses on *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and the auralty of the London crowd, arguing that Conrad's sound impressions reveal his concern about the power of 'workman oratory' in a period of social upheaval. Chapter 2 considers the silences and noises of 'The Return', which are usually located in the context of Alvan Hervey's troubled psyche. It offers an alternative reading which foregrounds the sounds of London's social topographics and also those popularly associated with *fin-de-siècle* fears about the city's moral collapse. Chapter 3 focuses on *The Secret Agent*, the inspiration for which has been the subject of much critical debate.

⁹⁷ Kreilkamp, p.201.

The chapter will discuss a less well-explored issue: Conrad's representation of the city's oral culture, in a transitional era for the dissemination of news and information. Finally, Chapter 4 discusses *Chance* and argues for Marlow's comedic tone as an expression of popular performance in a period when the influence and aesthetics of music-hall were beginning to be more widely appreciated.

Chapter 1

‘Workman oratory’ and *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*

There is a plethora of talk which seems to stop all thought, and by its ceaseless noise drive those who wish to think back on themselves. All talk and no one listens, still less answers, for all must swell the general output of the chatter of the world. Bishops and Deans, with politicians, agitators, betting men, Women’s Rights Advocates, members of Parliament, lawyers, nay even soldiers, sailors, the incredible average man and most egregious superior person, must all be at it. [...]

The writer writes, toils, waits, publishes and succeeds at last, but feels no flush of triumph like to that which the ‘cabotin,’ preacher, pleader or mob-orator enjoys when he perceives the eyes of the whole audience fixed upon him like a myriad of electric sparks; their ears drink in his words, and men and women, rich, poor, old, young, foolish and wise alike, bound all together by the power of speech.¹

Late nineteenth-century London may be characterized as a talkative city. As this account by Cunninghame Graham suggests, there was a diverse range of speakers with causes to espouse. Graham’s article was written from the perspective of one who had endured the imposed silence of the prison cell; ten years previously, he had received a six-week jail sentence for his part in the ‘Bloody Sunday’ riots in Trafalgar Square. Graham’s article ends in praise of his oratorical age; the alternative silence, he decides, would be too awful to contemplate: ‘I maintain no city of

¹ R.B. Cunninghame Graham, ‘Sursum Corda’, *Saturday Review*, 19 June 1897, 682-3 (p.682).

tremendous night could be more awful than a speechless world'.² However, he is equally mindful of the seductive power of all forms of 'preaching' and 'pleading' on speaker and audience alike. Graham's article provides a reminder that while this period witnessed growing concerns about written 'journalese' and the nascent influence of a popular press, it was equally marked by an awareness of the power of the 'platform'.

The diaries of Olive Garnett give a flavour of these oratorical times.³ Garnett records an eclectic range of speakers, discoursing in London's churches, meeting-halls, parks and streets. In addition to partaking in the fashionable practice of 'sermon tasting' at various West End churches, she attends lectures at, for example, Essex Hall (on the Strand) and the South Place Ethical Society (at Finsbury).⁴ Garnett's diaries provide an especially vivid record of the ubiquitous anarchist orators of her time, both at 'open-air' meetings in Regent's Park, and at more formal gatherings, like the Portman Rooms (off Baker Street), where, in February 1892, she observes a 'large and fashionable audience' listening to the Russian exile Prince Kropotkin.⁵

Conrad began his writing career in the late-1890s, a period when the platform (in all its guises) seems to have been a central feature of London's cultural and social life.⁶ As Garnett's and Graham's accounts suggest, the popularity of public lectures and sermons spanned the social classes. The

² Ibid.

³ See *Tea and Anarchy: The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1890-93*, ed. by Barry C. Johnson (London: Bartlett's Press, 1989) and *Olive & Stepniak: The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1893-95*, ed. by Barry C. Johnson (Birmingham: Bartlett's Press, 1993). Olive was the sister of Edward Garnett, Conrad's editor, and friend of the Rossetti sisters (Ford Madox Ford's cousins) who established their own printing press for anarchist publications.

⁴ See Joseph S. Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) p.163. Meisel notes the fashionable, and predominantly secular, practice of attending sermons in this period and describes the second half of the nineteenth-century as 'a great age of preaching' (p.145).

⁵ *Tea and Anarchy*, p.63.

⁶ See Meisel, and Robert T. Oliver, *Public Speaking in the Reshaping of Great Britain* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1987). Martin Hewitt also notes a revival in the popularity of the public lecture in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century and argues for the platform as 'a cultural form in its own right': see 'Aspects of Platform Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 29:1 (2002), 1-32 (p.1).

West End wealthy, like Galsworthy's Forsytes in *The Man of Property* (1906), attended 'with some regularity the more fashionable churches of the Metropolis'.⁷ They also flocked to the Royal Institution in Piccadilly, membership for which peaked in 1904, for information about the latest scientific inventions.⁸ At the other end of the social spectrum, there was a ready audience for accessible means of learning and general self-improvement, which the 1870 Education Act had helped to create. George R. Sims's *Living London* gives an impression of an audience at one of London's 'institutes', noting the 'mechanics, law students, City clerks, and shop assistants' attending a Debating Society at the Working Men's College in Great Ormond Street.⁹ Elsewhere, those needing moral and spiritual guidance (in Darwin's and Huxley's wake) could attend a wide range of lectures and sermons. The lists of 'Lectures and Meetings' published by contemporary newspapers indicate some popular concerns. T.P. O'Connor's *Weekly Sun*, for example, lists talks on such matters as 'Is the Cosmos Ethical?', 'Shall we Live after we are Dead?', 'The Art of Living' and, encapsulating the great *fin-de-siècle* dilemma, 'Religion and Science'.¹⁰

In *The Soul of London*, Ford chronicles the popularity of the 'official talker or moralist', referring to the popularity of the City Temple (on Holborn Viaduct) and relating this to the Londoner's predilection for a 'dose of reflections' administered as the aural equivalent of a pithy newspaper paragraph.¹¹ While a West-Enders like Olive Garnett might attend sermons and lectures which could be clearly and traditionally identified as religious, educational, scientific, or, indeed, fashionably

⁷ John Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p.28.

⁸ See Gwendy Caroe, *The Royal Institution: An Informal History* (London: John Murray, 1985), p.100.

⁹ Hugh B. Philpott, 'Institute London', in *Living London*, Vol.2, ed. by George R. Sims (London: Cassell, 1902), pp.189-195 (p.195).

¹⁰ 'Today's Lectures and Meetings', *Weekly Sun*, 18 July 1897, p.11.

¹¹ Ford, *The Soul of London*, pp.88-90.

‘anarchic’, there was also a plethora of speakers operating on the fringes, on behalf of, for example, spiritualist groups and quasi-religious ‘sects’. To use Holbrook Jackson’s terms, there were many looking for guidance about ‘How to Live’ in a spiritually confused period.¹² The audience for the City Temple, mentioned by Ford and recurring in other accounts of this period, appears to have been socially mixed: a 1902 article on ‘Dissenting London’ notes that it is ‘crowded every Sunday with worshippers from every part of London’.¹³ However, whatever the actual social make-up of their audience, the ‘fringe’ preachers were stereotypically believed to appeal to the lower-middle-classes, as the consumers of popular newspapers and periodicals. For this group, an effective speaker was arguably one who sounded like the aural equivalent of the popular press. Of the language of Frederic William Farrar (a populist preacher), an 1884 article in *Temple Bar* noted, for example, that it caused ‘ecstasy amongst those worshippers who derive their wisdom from penny newspapers’.¹⁴ Similarly, the socialist agitators and philanthropic reformers were aware of the need to appeal to this particular group and were often of a religious persuasion themselves, as will be discussed further below. This is an appropriate context in which to consider the influence of popular oratory on Conrad’s *œuvre*.

As Jeremy Hawthorn has noted, there is no shortage of Conradian characters with powerful voices whose eloquence suggests deception and a lack of substance.¹⁵ Hawthorn cites Wait, Verloc, Kurtz and Peter Ivanovitch as examples, but to those might be added Donkin. Donkin’s voice is, of course, very apparent in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, and it

¹² Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1913), p.33.

¹³ Howard Angus Kennedy, ‘Dissenting London’, in *Living London*, Vol.2, ed. by Sims, pp.68-73 (p.70).

¹⁴ ‘Preachers of the Day’, *Temple Bar* (70), April 1884, p. 489. Quoted by Meisel, p.146.

¹⁵ Jeremy Hawthorn, *Narrative Technique and Ideological Commitment* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990), p.114.

tends to be dismissed as a simple mouthpiece for the type of rabid socialism to which Conrad was so antipathetic. Peter McDonald, for example, has identified Donkin as a '*failed* agitator', who 'serves as the focus of the novella's attack on Socialism'.¹⁶ In this chapter I will argue that Donkin's representational status is rather more complex. Donkin is both an archetypal 'man of the crowd' and what might be described as a 'workman *manqué*', at a time when that figure was of such interest. The English workman was an ambiguous figure in this period, alternatively patronized, admired, or feared, depending on political viewpoints and attitudes towards the frequent incidences of social disorder. The 'London mechanic' was a 'good fellow', according to Ford.¹⁷ However, he also represented the class most at risk of being stirred into social revolution, and throughout this period there are frequent conflations of the appeal of the quasi-religious preacher and the mob orator in this regard. Both used language which, it was thought, appealed to their audience's sentiment, rather than to their reason, as Max Nordau's 1896 essay 'A Lay Sermon' asserts:

Innumerable apostles preaching their turbid doctrines in all the factories and workshops, found hearers who were easily discontented and carried away. The social democracy of the workmen was neither a political nor economic programme which appealed to the intellect, or could be proved or argued about, but rather an instinct in which religious mysticism, good and bad impulses, needs, emotional desires were wonderfully mingled.¹⁸

The power of oratory was the subject of especial public comment during the 1889 Dock Strike. This chapter will begin by exploring the influence of this event and considering its impact on Conrad's characterization of Donkin in particular.

¹⁶ Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 62-3.

¹⁷ Ford, *The Soul of London*, p.90.

¹⁸ Max Nordau, 'A Lay Sermon', in *The Malady of the Century* (London: Heinemann, 1896) p.9.

Donkin and the right to be heard

The ‘Great Dock Strike’ took place between mid-August and mid-September 1889 in protest at the casual process of hiring workers at the Docks’ gates and to demand a ‘tanner’ an hour for the work undertaken. At this time, Conrad was in London, living at Bessborough Gardens in Pimlico and looking with difficulty, due to the strike, for the command of a ship; eventually he went to Belgium for work.¹⁹ The Docks encountered by Conrad during this period would have been eerily silent. Their usual racket was caused by the incessant transit of merchandise from the cargo ships to the carts and wagons which then rattled along their heavily-laden way down granite-surfaced streets. In *Chance*, Conrad suggests that this created an exclusive auralty which rendered anyone uninvolved in this process as of ‘no account’ (158), an impression which is relevant for the earlier novella *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, where the commitment to work, or, as in Donkin’s case, its avoidance, plays such an important thematic role. At the end of the novella, as the ship reaches St Katherine’s Dock near Tower Hill, we can hear similar noises of London’s ceaseless industry:

A noise of wheels rolling over stones, the thump of heavy things falling, the racket of feverish winches, the grinding of strained chains, floated on the air. (165)

The significance of the sound of work to the London psyche should not be understated. Only at night, it seems, did a silence descend on the Docks; with morning came a noisy and vocal clamour for work as the workers were hired. When the daytime noises were silenced, as happened during the Dock Strike, so was the trading power of the great imperial city. An

¹⁹ See Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, p.58.

account of the strike in the *Pall Mall Budget* describes the ‘silent river’, and notes how a ‘solemn stillness, which is almost appalling in its intensity, reigns over everything’.²⁰ Elsewhere, *The Times* comments that the streets of the city, bereft of all those heavily laden wagons and carts, ‘bore a Saturday afternoon aspect – a time when the roar of labour traffic is over’.²¹

The strike was ultimately successful and the dockers’ terms were met, the oratorical efforts of the strike committee having played a crucial role. The committee included Ben Tillett (the strike’s main leader), Tom Mann, Will Thorne, and the charismatic John Burns, who proved to be an attractive role model for the ‘workman orator’. Other powerful speakers included Annie Besant, George Bernard Shaw, William Morris and Cunninghame Graham. The strikers were addressed daily at Tower Hill, a place which had played a symbolic role in London’s history, as a site both of celebration and civic unrest. Conrad describes this part of London at the end of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*:

To the left of them the trees in Tower Gardens sighed, the stones of the Tower gleaming, seemed to stir in the play of light, as if remembering suddenly all the great joys and sorrows of the past, the fighting prototypes of these men; press-gangs; mutinous cries; the wailing of the women by the riverside, and the shouts of men welcoming victories. (172)

While Conrad’s impressions of Tower Hill seemingly evoke the city’s ancient past, the ‘mutinous cries’ may also allude to this location’s status as a site of working-class protest: the ‘Trafalgar Square of East London’. Such was the description accorded it by H. Llewellyn Smith and Vaughan Nash, who chronicle the power of the eloquence of Burns *et al.*²² Ford’s

²⁰ *Pall Mall Budget*, 29 August 1889, p.1094 (Newspaper Cuttings Book 2, Museum in Docklands Archive, London).

²¹ ‘The Strikes at the East End’, *The Times*, 27 August 1889, p.4.

²² H. Llewellyn Smith and Vaughan Nash, *The Story of the Dockers’ Strike, told by two East Londoners* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1889), p. 39.

memoirs, written in 1931, suggest that he was amongst the crowds listening at Tower Hill, and his account of Tillett ‘almost out of his mind at the news’ (of a move that was advantageous to the Government), and calling on the crowd to ‘curse God’, give a flavour of contemporary comment about the social activist’s combination of political intent and religiously-driven fanaticism.²³ Tillett’s own memoirs describe the Union movement as a ‘genuine new evangel’, a ‘gospel’, which was disseminated at street corners and in squares with a ‘babel of tongues’.²⁴

While Conrad’s own correspondence and recollections make no reference to hearing the speeches or the response of the gathered crowds, the noise would have been hard to miss, as would newspaper commentary about the effect that the speakers were having on the crowd. The daily meetings and speeches are recorded in *The Times* and elsewhere in great detail, together with parenthetical records of the ‘cheers’ and ‘jeers’ of the crowds. Conrad would also have frequently encountered the more random orations of ‘casual speakers’, those men who, as the *Morning Advertiser* reports, gathered randomly to debate and discuss:

The men who did not accompany their fellows to town assembled at street corners in little groups, and with solemn voices, and in low and earnest tones, discussed the situation. Occasionally, one of their number, credited with what they term the ‘gift of the gab,’ would be called upon to deliver an address, and the burden of his song was usually the tyranny of capital over labour.²⁵

Conrad’s experience of the actual and reported oratory that took place during the Dock Strike provides a suggestive context for Donkin, the speech of whom is often not marked by interactive dialogue, but by rhetorical-style monologues. At the beginning of the novella, for example, Donkin engages the crew’s sympathy with some artfully constructed

²³ Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday*, ed. by Bill Hutchings (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p.82.

²⁴ Ben Tillett, *Memories and Reflections* (London: John Long, 1931), pp.188-9.

²⁵ *Morning Advertiser*, 30 August 1889, n.p. (Newspaper Cuttings Book 2, Museum in Docklands Archive).

parallels. Having established his general impoverishment, he continues: ‘No bag, no bed, no blanket, no shirt – not a bloomin’ rag but what I stand in’ (12). This is a style which suggests the emotive rhetoric of the contemporary social reformer or philanthropist: a call to sentiment and sympathy which was very much in tune with the popular oratory of this period. In *Return to Yesterday*, for example, Ford recalls an 1892 speech by Charles Booth, where he asked of his audience whether they knew that London’s poor had, for example, ‘no fire in the grate, no meal on the table’ and even ‘no candle to go to bed by’.²⁶ The manner in which the sailor-narrator recalls Donkin’s attempt to stir up a mutiny are also interesting in this context. The narrator has clearly heard Donkin use a series of rhetorical questions, like an orator addressing a crowd, and he recalls these using indirect speech: ‘Who thanked us? Who took any notice of our wrongs? Didn’t we lead a “dorg’s loife for two poun’ ten a month?” Did we think that miserable pay enough to compensate us for the risk to our lives and for the loss of our clothes?’ (100). This, according to the narrator, is speech imbued with a ‘picturesque and filthy loquacity’ (101). Conrad’s use of the word ‘picturesque’ is significant: this word was used, as I will discuss below, to describe the oratorical style of John Burns, who sought to convey an aural ‘image’ for a working-class audience adjusting to the purple prose of popular journalism.

There is another possible allusion to the Dock Strike when Donkin attempts to mobilize the crew through the command ‘Well then, strike, boys, strike!’ (121). ‘Strike boys, strike, for better wages’ was the rallying song of the Dock Strike and it is likely that Conrad would have heard this sung on the streets during this time. The song was a parody, as Derek B. Scott notes, of a conservative song from 1867 entitled ‘Work, Boys, Work’,

²⁶ Ford, *Return to Yesterday*, p.83.

apparently sung to the tune of another song ‘Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!’²⁷ If Conrad was aware of the song and its origins, an association with the workshy Donkin would have been especially ironic. The pun on ‘strike’ is also surely intentional, as Donkin does ‘strike’ when he throws the belaying-pin, an action which makes the crew aware of his innate violence.

As is well-known, Conrad based *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* on his experience as the second mate on board the real-life *Narcissus* in 1884 and this ship’s crew provided the inspiration for their fictional counterparts. Simmons and Stape suggest that Conrad’s inspiration for the name Donkin may have derived from his stay between December 1883 and February 1884 in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, which had a park ‘The Donkin Reserve’, named after Sir Rufane Donkin.²⁸ However, it is possible that Conrad simply borrowed the name, having seen an ‘H.B. Donkin’ writing in the February 1895 edition of the *New Review*, where the novella would later be serialized (in 1897). As Peter McDonald has discussed, Conrad was a reader and admirer of the *New Review*, and had had this journal, and its editor W.H. Henley, in his sights since at least 1896.²⁹ If Conrad did utilize the name from there, this would have been an act of typically Conradian irony, given this publication’s reactionary politics. Conrad may also have been making an ironic association through the sound of Donkin’s name with its suggestion of a ‘donkey’: the job of ‘donkey-man’ in a ship’s crew involved especially hard physical labour.

What is of particular note is that in 1884 the franchise was extended by the Reform Act, which gave new voice and credence to the rights of the ordinary working man. However, in terms of their vocal expression out on

²⁷ Derek B. Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour*, 2nd edn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p.220. See also Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs & Social Comment* (London: Pimlico, 1996), pp. 109-10.

²⁸ Allan H. Simmons and John Stape, ‘Notes’, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, ed. by Simmons and Stape (London: Penguin, 2007), pp.421-22.

²⁹ McDonald, pp.27-9.

the city's streets, these were simultaneously being controlled and curtailed. Donkin's assertions of his rights are correspondingly heart-felt and rather defensive: 'And I can look after my rights! I will show 'em!' (9). Again, shortly afterwards, when describing his experience on board an American ship, he relates that 'I stood up for my rights like a good 'un'(11-12). The apparently omnipresent narration identifies Donkin by his idleness, and as a type adopted by philanthropists. Donkin is also established as an 'independent' creature of the slums, in terms which suggest that his is the type of 'freedom' which has led to a contempt for the 'servitude' of hard work required on board ship.

They all knew him! He was the man that cannot steer, that cannot splice, that dodges the work on dark nights. [...] The pet of philanthropists and self-seeking landlubbers. The sympathetic and deserving creature that knows all about his rights, but knows nothing of courage, of endurance, and of the unexpected faith, of the unspoken loyalty that knits together a ship's company. The independent offspring of the ignoble freedom of the slums full of disdain and hate for the austere servitude of the sea. (10-11)

When the ship's crew are paid off at the end of the voyage, Donkin claims that he is going to have a 'job ashore' (169). Later, the sailor-narrator ponders about what this job might be: 'And Donkin, who never did a decent day's work in his life, no doubt earns his living by discoursing with filthy eloquence upon the right of labour to live' (172). Conrad's use of the word 'filthy' makes plain his dislike of the type of eloquence which was designed solely to stir up an audience into violent action. His reference to 'earn' is presumably ironic, suggesting that this is how Donkin will justify his existence, rather than take on a specific role as, for example, a union leader.

Through Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, Conrad would later characterize another figure whose innate laziness pre-empted fulfilment of the role of 'workman orator'. Verloc, as we learn, is too indolent 'even for a mere

demagogue, for a workman orator, for a leader of labour' (16). Verloc looks the part: he has the appearance of a 'well-to-do mechanic in business for himself' (16). However, the opportunity for this form of self-improvement has actually passed him by, as it has Paul, the *ouvrier* of 'The Anarchist'. Paul had been 'thinking of setting up for himself' (*SoS* 145). However, he gets drawn into anarchism and, unable to find employment elsewhere, is destined to end up as the 'anarchist slave' (*SoS* 161) of Harry Gee and his company B.O.S. When Paul identifies himself as an *ouvrier*, Gee responds 'What sort of workman?' (*SoS* 142), a comment which expresses some of the contemporary ambiguities surrounding this term: Gee is convinced that Paul 'must be an anarchist' because 'That's the class they come mostly from' (*SoS* 142). Indeed, Paul is in servitude to the very term 'worker', as this term has become malleable and dependent upon the self-interest of the person using it. At his trial, Paul is represented by a self-improving 'young socialist lawyer' with his own 'way to make' (*SoS* 147-8). Paul asserts that he is a 'quiet, respectable mechanic' but this is ignored by the lawyer who portrays him as a 'victim of society' (*SoS* 147). The lawyer's oratorical skills do his own career some good – the 'speech for the defence was pronounced magnificent' (*SoS* 148) – but Paul is imprisoned. As Donovan has argued, the lawyer's speech 'advertises himself but damns his client' in a story where the power of advertising is apparent throughout.³⁰ To extend Donovan's reading, Conrad also engages with the problem of 'platform' language: to Paul's cost, the court-room was the lawyer's stage.

The term 'workman' and its variances clearly interested Conrad, as is also evident in *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlow recalls: 'I was also one

³⁰ Donovan, p.135.

of the Workers, with a capital – you know’ (53).³¹ In this case, this is an allusion to the workmen of the imperial project, a mission fuelled, like that of the fanatical priest, or the anarchist-orator, by a sense of religious zeal, as an ‘emissary of light, something like a lower sort of apostle’ (53). This interest is also clear in *The Secret Agent*, in this case as expressed by Vladimir, who categorizes Verloc thus:

The fellow was unexpectedly vulgar, heavy, and impudently unintelligent. He looked uncommonly like a master plumber come to present his bill. The First Secretary of the Embassy, from his occasional excursions into the field of American humour, had formed a special notion of that class of mechanic as the embodiment of fraudulent laziness and incompetency. (26)

Conrad thereby suggests a dissonance between Verloc’s appearance and his actual ‘work’, which will later become darkly ironic, as he sets off with Stevie to blow up the Greenwich Observatory. As Heat relates, the porter at Maze Hill station had taken Verloc and Stevie for two reassuringly familiar figures: ‘They seemed to him two respectable workingmen of a superior sort – sign painters or house decorators’ (81).

Anne Baltz Rodrick identifies the social phenomenon in mid-Victorian Britain of the young, working-class autodidact who sought to identify himself as a ‘working man’ rather than as a ‘mechanic’ or ‘worker’.³² Rodrick notes how Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* (1859) emphasized the hard work involved in the acquisition of culture and education.³³ Some of the aspirational working-class men who spent their leisure time in education, cultural activities and at meetings of mutual societies thus distanced themselves from the type of ‘workers’ whose lives were defined solely by their economic status. One of the Dock Strike’s main leaders, John Burns,

³¹ Cedric Watts notes that this is a reference to Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843), which refers to ‘ye Workers’. See ‘Explanatory Notes’, *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, ed. by Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.206.

³² Anne Baltz Rodrick, ‘The Importance of being an Earnest Improver: Class, Caste, and *Self-Help* in Mid-Victorian England’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 29:1 (2001), 39-50 (p.45).

³³ *Ibid.*, p.42.

is an interesting figure in this context. Burns may be identified as a role model for this kind of self-improving and industrious working man, whose type Conrad ironically subverts through his characterizations of Verloc and Donkin. Described by his contemporary biographer as ‘the standard-bearer of the rude mechanicals’, Burns (born in 1858) rose from impoverished beginnings as an apprentice engineer in Battersea to a later career as a Liberal MP and influential member of the establishment, including a Presidency of the Board of Trade.³⁴ Burns’s harsh attitude towards the unemployed in his later career led to his denouncement as a ‘turncoat’ and class traitor by Hyndman, whose comments express the ingrained social prejudices of this time: Hyndman turns on his old colleague, suggesting that Burns had once been ‘as ignorant and rough a specimen of the English working man as I have ever encountered’.³⁵

Burns’s early career included a period spent working in Africa as a ship’s engineer, sailing around the coast, as A.N. Wilson suggests, ‘like some character in Conrad’.³⁶ By the 1890s, Burns was in Conrad’s orbit to the extent that, as a fellow orator and one-time prison in-mate, he was close to Cunninghame Graham. Surviving correspondence between Graham and Burns from 1888 to the early-1890s indicates the frequency of their contact during this period.³⁷ Ford also appears to have known Burns, but possibly not until after this time. He recalls having lunch with him at the Mont Blanc restaurant; the date of their meeting is unspecified but as he mentions that Burns was President of the Board of Trade, which ‘superintends our Arts’, this is likely to have been between 1906-8.³⁸

³⁴ Arthur P. Grubb, *John Burns* (London: Dalton, 1908), p.101. When he became MP for Battersea in 1906, Burns was the first working man to join the Cabinet.

³⁵ H.M. Hyndman in the ‘Foreword’ to Joseph Burgess, *John Burns: The Rise and Progress of a Right Honourable* (Glasgow: The Reformers’ Bookstall, 1911), pp.vii-viii.

³⁶ A.N. Wilson, *The Victorians* (London: Arrow Books, 2003), p.514.

³⁷ London, British Library, John Burns Papers, Vol.IV, Special Correspondence, Additional Ms. 46,284.

³⁸ Ford, *Return to Yesterday*, pp.309-10.

Conrad's correspondence indicates that he also knew Burns by this time. In a letter to J.B. Pinker in February 1908, he writes:

I went to see Masterman and John Burns. The first may be useful in the affair of the pension later on. The second notified me of his intention to come and see me here on his return from Bedford where he is going next week. (CL4 32)

It is unclear whether the meeting ever took place. Conrad does not mention it again in his correspondence and John Burns makes no mention of this in his diary for 1908.³⁹ Conrad may have made contact with Burns regarding the Royal Literary Fund, from which he received some funds in April 1908.

Conrad did not meet either Graham or Ford until after the completion of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and so, during the period of its conception, he could not have been aware of Burns through them. However, Burns was such a well-known orator during the 1889 Dock Strike, that Conrad would have been aware of his symbolic appeal as a modern figure who had made the transition from traditional street-corner ranting to the management of a compelling platform performance. Newspaper and biographical accounts suggest that Burns looked and, most importantly, *sounded*, like the archetypal self-improving autodidact of his era. As one biographer notes, Burns had developed the skill of 'epigrammatic speeches' and had 'learned the art of oratory in the best academy – the park and the street corner'.⁴⁰ An appearance of everyday ordinariness appears to have central to his popular appeal. According to Burns's colleague Tom Mann, he 'looked the engineer all over', in contrast to Cunninghame Graham who took to the platform 'neat as a West End dude'.⁴¹

³⁹ John Burns Papers, Vol.XLV1, Diaries, Add. Ms. 46326.

⁴⁰ Grubb, pp. 59-60.

⁴¹ Tom Mann, *Memoirs* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), p.64.

Tillett recalls that Burns was a ‘born showman’ and that his comrade had a ‘voice like a megaphone’.⁴² Such comments about the vocal qualities of orators recur throughout accounts of the Dock Strike: as was the case for Verloc in *The Secret Agent*, a powerful voice led to fame and usefulness at ‘open air meetings and at workmen’s assemblies in large halls’ (23). The popular influence of Burns’s speeches is generally ascribed to a clever combination of impressive allusions drawn from a well-stocked home library (newly acquired, not inherited), a hint of morality, and a range of ‘jocular’ phrases of the type and tone which his audience might have read in a newspaper, seen in advertisements, or heard in a music-hall.⁴³

Surviving notes from Burns’s speeches indicate that he addressed his crowd as ‘Friends and Fellow Workmen’.⁴⁴ As Smith and Nash recount, he then continued by delivering the ‘news’ of the strike in ‘short, sharp, picturesque sentences’ to the crowd, for whom Tower Hill had become their ‘morning’s newspaper’.⁴⁵ While Smith and Nash use the word in laudatory terms, ‘picturesque’ also had less positive connotations as the type of speech which was colourful and exaggerated and had only a tenuous connection with the truth. This is the meaning clearly intended by Conrad when, as noted above, he uses it to describe the nature of Donkin’s loquacity in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*. In an urban context, the word ‘picturesque’ also had some topicality as an ironic description for a ‘landscape’ strewn with advertisements rather than foliage. Donovan draws attention to a *Punch* cartoon from September 1890 entitled ‘Picturesque London’ which shows Fleet Street covered with advertisements, and a two-dimensional St Paul’s which is drawn in the

⁴² Tillett, p.136.

⁴³ See Smith and Nash, pp.36-7.

⁴⁴ John Burns Papers, Vol. XXV, Speeches, memoranda, Add. Ms.46,305.

⁴⁵ Smith and Nash, pp.79-80.

style of an advertisement hoarding.⁴⁶ Donovan notes Conrad's contempt for advertising, arguing that his experience of London was 'profoundly shaped' by this medium.⁴⁷ In this context, Conrad's treatment of Donkin's speech reminds us that such adverts could have their aural equivalent. This took the form of speech which set out to create pictures in words – 'sound-bites', to use a twenty-first-century expression, which appealed to audiences for whom style and form seemed to be triumphing over content.

Fictional representations of workman orators, from the comic to the sinister, recur throughout this period, notably in the work of Wells and Gissing, but also in that of Henry James and Galsworthy. Galsworthy's play *Strife*, for example, which was first performed in 1909, centres on a strike at a tin-plate works and includes the character David Roberts, an engineer who leads the workmen's committee.⁴⁸ These characterizations reflect the engagement and curiosity of Conrad's contemporaries towards the different types of artisan that had emerged by the end of the nineteenth century. They also express a recognition that different ways of speaking were now gaining currency, as the classic rules of rhetoric were beginning to be supplanted by the modern rhythms of the music-hall and also by popular journalism. 'How am I to express myself? One must use the current words' (59): Ossipon's comment to the Professor in *The Secret Agent* seemingly encapsulates a new self-consciousness about spoken language, in a period when the language of newsprint offered ready terms of expression. The manner in which the aspirant social reformer might draw on the newspapers for his speeches is described in Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), where the chemist worker and anarchist Paul Muniment mocks Hyacinth Robinson: 'Look at the way he has picked up all the silly bits of catchwords.[...]You must have got that precious

⁴⁶ Reproduced and discussed in Donovan, pp.112-114.

⁴⁷ Donovan, p.113.

⁴⁸ John Galsworthy, *Strife* (London: Duckworth, 1964).

phrase out of the newspapers'.⁴⁹ It is significant that the main narrative turning-point is provided by Hyacinth finally taking to the 'platform' in the back room of the 'Sun and Moon' pub, when he pledges himself to the revolutionary cause. Hyacinth is conscious of the vacuity of the speeches there, as the workmen thump the tables, each one 'repeating over some inane phrase which appeared for the hour to constitute the whole furniture of his mind'.⁵⁰

The linguistically self-conscious autodidact also had to negotiate the auralty of terms that he or she was more likely to have read than heard. George Gissing parodies this situation in *Demos* (1886), where the social agitators Cowes and Cullen use 'oratory with a vengeance':

[Mr Cowes] prides himself upon his grammar, goes back to correct a concord, emphasizes eccentricities of punctuation: for instance, he accents 'capitalist' on the second syllable, and repeats the words with grave challenge to all and sundry.⁵¹

Elsewhere, the novelist Margaret Harkness, writing as 'John Law', expresses a commonly-held concern that the working-classes might not understand what they were hearing.⁵² On the subject of educational lectures, she comments on the 'mental indigestion' suffered in lecture-halls from working-class audiences listening to things 'beyond their understanding', who then 'carry away words and phrases' for misinterpretation and exaggeration.⁵³

For the aspirant workman orator, it was therefore necessary to sound like the educated voice of reason. Their liberally inclined middle-class listeners could be impressed, as was Olive Garnett, by hearing working-men who 'spoke very well and used excellent phrases' at anarchist gatherings.⁵⁴ This

⁴⁹ Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 151.

⁵⁰ James, *The Princess Casamassima*, p.280.

⁵¹ George Gissing, *Demos* (London: Dent, n.d.), pp.57-8.

⁵² John Law [Margaret Harkness], *In Darkest London* (London: William Reeves, 1893).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.171.

⁵⁴ *Tea and Anarchy*, ed. by Johnson, p.66.

is something of which the eponymous hero of Wells's *Love and Mr Lewisham* is aware: he is proud that his paper on socialism was 'closely reasoned, delivered with a disciplined emotion'.⁵⁵ In his later work, *Kipps* (1905), Wells again captures an urban world of debating societies, lecture-halls and meetings. In *Kipps*, the work of the socialist Masterman, rather like Kurtz, defies classification: he is, variously, journalist, poet, writer for the *Commonweal*, dentist, and chemist. Masterman possesses the power of popular influence. This derives from two sources: his impressive (to his peers) self-education (he has, as Kipps's friend Sid notes, 'eaps of books') and his voice (as Sid tells Kipps, 'When he really gets to talking – he *pours* it out').⁵⁶

Through his dedication of *The Secret Agent* to H.G. Wells as 'The chronicler of Mr Lewisham's Love', 'The biographer of Kipps' and 'The historian of the ages to come' (2), Conrad shows his familiarity with Wells's world of aspirant shop-keepers and other self-improvers, who frequent London's institutes and meeting-halls. In contrast, the *dramatis personae* of *The Secret Agent* occupy a marginal world which may be characterized as a 'quasi' society, comprising those who ascribed to beliefs which may be categorized as quasi-religious, quasi-scientific, quasi-educational and, indeed, quasi-anarchic. For example, Verloc is not a straightforward anarchist but a double agent. Similarly, Ossipon is on the fringes of education, as a 'wandering lecturer to working-men's associations' who has penned a 'popular quasi-scientific study' (40-41). We also learn that the Professor's father had preached for an 'obscure but rigid Christian sect' (66). This is a suggestive context for the psychopathic Professor, who is thus associated by Conrad with the fringes of traditional religion, and by extension with the sort of fanaticism with which, as a

⁵⁵ H. G. Wells, *Love and Mr Lewisham* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.59.

⁵⁶ H. G. Wells, *Kipps* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.224.

French visitor in 1888 observed, the lower-middle-classes tended to support ‘independent sects’.⁵⁷ While Wells, graduate of the ‘Normal School of Science’ in Kensington, evokes a benign world of earnest artisans intent on self-improvement and the socialist cause, Conrad, like James, portrays its more sinister margins.

While London had its famously outstanding orators, who spoke openly at locations like Trafalgar Square, Tower Hill, and Hyde Park, it also had a potentially more sinister class, who took to the ‘platform’ in the back-rooms of public-houses, or in shops like the one at No. 32 Brett Street. For both types of orator, it was crucial to put on a good ‘show’. As accounts identifying the popular appeal of Burns suggest, this was perceived to be an important factor when attempting to influence a working-class audience who were stereotypically likely to be engaged by the hoopla of popular theatre and music-hall. Gissing parodies the tastes of the ‘typical English mechanic’ in *Demos*, through his characterization of Daniel Dobbs, who finds that the speeches of the agitators Cowes and Cullen have ‘affected him with an agreeable sensation’ and have been, as he tells his brother, ‘as good as a play’.⁵⁸ In dock-side public-houses a ‘platform’ was often utilized both for serious debate and music-hall-style entertainment. It is notable how references to acting recur in Conrad’s treatment of anarchism. In *The Informer* (1908), for example, Mr X notes that the anarchist Severin has ‘something of the air of a taciturn actor or of a fanatical priest’ (*SoS* 85). Similarly, in *The Secret Agent*, Yundt is ‘not even an orator of torrential eloquence, sweeping the masses along in the rushing noise and foam of a great enthusiasm’ but an ‘actor on platforms, in secret assemblies, in private interviews’ (42). Conrad thus associates performance with the ‘quasi-society’ of the religious zealot and agitator

⁵⁷ See Villars, p.34.

⁵⁸ Gissing, *Demos*, p.356.

who exert their influence in ‘secret assemblies’ rather than those who engage with influencing the ‘masses’ on a bigger stage.

As Donovan has argued, Donkin, like Wait, is ‘repeatedly characterized in terms of a public performance’ in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*.⁵⁹ Donkin is first identified by the chief mate Baker as that ‘cheeky costermonger’ (21), an impression which is consistent with the former’s association (through the crew’s nicknaming) with Whitechapel. By the early-1900s, it would seem that the costers mainly traded in impoverished districts like Hoxton and Whitechapel, rather than on the central thoroughfares of the city.⁶⁰ However, Conrad may also have intended to suggest that Donkin appeared as a coster ‘type’ to Baker, a reified version of an opportunistic street-trader as represented in a music-hall ‘turn’. Donkin certainly seems to possess the ability of the actor to change expression and voice tone as needed, suggesting, to use Sanford Pinsker’s description, a ‘verbal confidence man’.⁶¹ At the outset of the novella, for example, Donkin performs his impoverishment to the crew, ‘looking right and left with affected surprise’ that Belfast is unaware that he has no shirt (11). Later, during Baker’s roll call, Donkin’s voice is similarly described as something artificial; it has ‘a flavour of insolence in the forced simplicity of its tone’ (16).

An association with the music-hall is also suggested by Donkin’s ‘Whitechapel’ nickname: as Donovan notes, early cinematic shows like the ‘Theatrograph’ were being screened at the Paragon on Mile End Road and Wonderland on Whitechapel Road during the late-1890s.⁶² Donovan has allied the unsympathetic characterization of Donkin with Conrad’s

⁵⁹ Stephen Donovan, *Conrad and Popular Culture*, p.27.

⁶⁰ See, for example, C. Duncan Lucas, ‘Coster-Land in London’, in *Living London*, Vol.2, ed. by Sims, pp.74-9.

⁶¹ Sanford Pinsker, ‘Joseph Conrad and the Language of the Sea’, *Conradiana*, 3:3 (1971-2), 15-21 (p.19).

⁶² Donovan, p.57.

attitude towards cinema, and his self-confessed dislike and suspicion of a spectacle which had the pretensions of an art form. Conrad's later denouncement of Chaplin and his comments to the artist Walter Tittle that films were 'absolutely the lowest form of amusement' made his antipathy clear.⁶³ For Donovan, like Pinsker, Donkin personifies the culture of the 'visual con'.⁶⁴ As I will argue in Chapter 4, Conrad's dislike of Chaplin may be associated with contemporary concerns about the decline in traditional clowning. Chaplin's silent slapstick offered a very different type of comedy to that of the traditional music-hall comedian, the verbal artistry of whom was considered as something of a dying art in literary circles in the early-Edwardian period. However, at this juncture, it should also be recalled that Whitechapel was not just associated with new forms of popular entertainment. The district had a much more longstanding reputation as a site of noisy social protest.

As typified by the Great Assembly Hall in the Mile End Road, the streets around Whitechapel and Poplar were full of meeting-rooms, pubs and coffee-houses where union leaders, agitators and social reformers gathered. An area known as the 'Mile End Waste' also symbolized the open spaces around London where crowds traditionally gathered to protest.⁶⁵ While the Reform Act of 1884 extended the franchise, it also heralded a change in civic /establishment attitudes towards such spaces. As Anna Davin has discussed, the transformation of Kennington Common, the site where the Chartists had gathered in 1848, epitomized a process happening across the city, as once open country was subsumed under new streets and houses.⁶⁶

⁶³ See *Joseph Conrad: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by Ray, p.161.

⁶⁴ Donovan, p.58.

⁶⁵ The Mile End Waste was the remaining section of Mile End Green, which originally encompassed an area between Stepney Green and Whitechapel. See T.S. Ridge, *Mile End Green and Stepney Green Open Space; and A History of Garden Street* (privately printed, 1988), in London Borough of Tower Hamlets Local Archives.

⁶⁶ Anna Davin, "'Socialist Infidels and Messengers of Light': Street Preaching and Debate in Mid-Nineteenth Century London', in *The Streets of London From the Great Fire to the Great Stink.*, ed. by Tim Hitchcock and Heather Shore (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1979), pp.165-82.

By 1853, this ‘common’ had become a ‘park’ at the request of the local gentry. By the late-1880s, in the surrounds of Whitechapel and Poplar, the right to gather had become a regular source of conflict between the police and such groups as the SDF (Social Democratic Foundation). John Burns protested about the ‘chain of police repression’ surrounding places like Dod Street, Poplar (where the SDF had clashed with the police) and Hyde Park, a centuries-old gathering place, where the right to free speech had been legitimized, but at the same time limited to specific areas. In his defence speech, Burns protested: ‘It is said that Hyde Park and other places are open to us. But in all these places attempts have been made to restrict the rights with a view, I believe, to abolishing them altogether’.⁶⁷ This was an issue that Cunninghame Graham also spoke about, arguing for the poor’s right to free speech as the ‘only safety-valve left to them in so large and dense a population as London’.⁶⁸

In this context, Donkin’s ‘impassioned orations’ (101) suggest the *defence* of a right as much as a confident expression of a ‘new’ right. The sounds of open-air protest, like the traditional street cries and entertainers, were by this era perceived as a feature of the old city. Donkin is ‘very loud’ (11) and dirty – he looks, amongst other things, as if he had been ‘rolled in the mud’ (9) – and in the words of James Wait, he is ‘East-end trash’ (45). He is always at the ready to challenge authority and to ‘kick up a bloomin’ row; a blamed ‘owling row that would make ‘em remember!’ (112). Such descriptions are associative of the poverty in Whitechapel and the street protests which were increasingly subject to civic control and authority.

⁶⁷ London Metropolitan Archive, Publications by John Burns, no. 4504, ‘Trafalgar Speech for the Defence’, 18 January 1888.

⁶⁸ Cunninghame Graham, *Hansard*, 2 March 1888. Quoted by Cedric Watts and Laurence Davies in *Cunninghame Graham: A Critical Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p.75.

It is notable that it is Wait, not the omniscient or sailor-narrator, or a figure of authority like the ship's captain or the chief mate, who dismisses Donkin so emphatically. Whitechapel was home to many different ethnic groups; it had, according to one record at least, the highest proportion of foreigners in the whole of London.⁶⁹ Accounts of the crowds agitating for social change do not record the racial mix involved, but it would seem likely that the social protest against existing hierarchies was an exclusively English affair, within which an ordinary black sailor like Wait might not have been expected to have a voice. That Donkin is a marginalized figure, even to another social outsider like Wait, serves to reinforce his exclusion both on the ship and in the city itself. Amongst the international crew on board the *Narcissus*, Donkin's voice thereby expresses an aggressive, and rather desperate, English nationalism, a sense of superiority to cling on to despite a life of desperate poverty. As Jacques Berthoud has argued, Donkin's socialism may be qualified as a 'national socialism', born out of this fundamental insecurity and a need to self-assert as an Englishman amongst the 'furriners' (13).⁷⁰

In Conrad's narrative, Donkin's protests are invalidated by his lack of commitment to the work ethos of the *Narcissus* where, as Baker reminds his crew, you must 'Work till you drop. That's what you're here for' (93). It had long been recognized that the commercial and global success of London depended on a similarly committed workforce. As Ian Monro observes, the outbreaks of crowd disorder that occurred in late-Elizabethan London were seen to have emanated from its vagrants: 'a huge but superfluous and malign population fundamentally out of place in the

⁶⁹ Arthur Sherwell, *Life in West London: A Study and a Contrast*, 2nd edn, revised (London: Methuen, 1897), p.58.

⁷⁰ Jacques Berthoud, 'Introduction', *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, ed by Berthoud (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.vii-xxvi (p.xiv).

economic function of London'.⁷¹ Conrad's description of Donkin's filthy appearance firmly establishes him as just such a vagrant: before joining the ship, he has clearly been sleeping rough, 'in a wet ditch' (10). By the end of the nineteenth century, as unionization increasingly brought the labourer some basic protection, so the problem of the disengaged became more acute. Newspaper accounts of the riots that took place in London in February 1886 describe the memorable and oft-cited clashes between the rich and the poor, as the marchers headed from Trafalgar Square to Pall Mall, where they were hooted and jeered at by men in the aristocratic clubs. However, what is also notable about these accounts is the perceived gulf between the genuine 'workers' (particularly as personified by the shopkeepers) and the 'loungers' and 'loafers', those who supported the strikers, but who seemingly had no interest in working themselves. The contrast between 'indoor' and 'outdoor' London is also apparent in accounts that the 'loafers contented themselves with hooting and hissing at the inmates of passing trams, omnibuses, carriages and cabs'.⁷² The employed, increasingly travelling to work by such means (rather than on foot) now seemingly inhabited a different world than those hanging about on the city's streets and two conflicting representations of the urban crowd may be discerned.

As Conrad noted in 'Stephen Crane', he sought to describe the 'psychology of the mass' (*LE* 72) in this work, as his friend Crane had done in *The Red Badge of Courage*, in the context of the army. At the beginning of *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, the chief mate Baker begins, as he says, to 'muster our crowd' (3), and Donkin is soon revealed as a threat in that crowd, hovering in the shadows. Early on, he is described as

⁷¹ Ian Monro, *The Figure of the Crowd in Early Modern London: The City and Its Double* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.37-38.

⁷² 'The Riots in London', *The Times*, 13 February 1886, p.6.

‘listening open-mouthed in the shadow of the midship locker’ (9), ready to announce his own shipboard priorities – the assertion of his rights. Later, he attempts to stir up his crowd into a mutiny, and he does so from within, dodging behind backs and only occasionally pushing through to the front, diving ‘under the elbows of the front rank’ (121). Donkin is the ever-present challenge to the crew’s cohesion and stability: he ‘glided behind backs, restless and anxious, like a man looking for an ambush’ (133). Captain Allistoun must confront this challenge and eventually Donkin is isolated as the violent source of trouble. He ‘dodged’, but the ‘ranks kept on opening before him, closing behind, till at last he appeared alone before the master as though he had come up through the deck’ (135).

Conrad’s characterization of Donkin as the marginalized ‘stirrer’ of discontent is consistent with contemporary fears about the menace that lurked within the crowd; while there was clearly an explicit threat in the revolutionary talk of the socialist agitator, there was a less tangible challenge from the disengaged and criminally inclined. At a time when the sociological study of the crowd was in its infancy, there also appears to have been a general mood of puzzlement as much as alarm in establishment circles about how and why massed groups of the working-classes might react in different ways. During the 1886 riots, for example, a *Times* journalist commented on the movements through the city’s streets of the ‘vagabondage of London, apparently associated by some mysterious sympathy’.⁷³ As I will argue further below, Conrad’s unsympathetic characterization of Donkin may be usefully allied to this sense of confusion about the ‘type’ he represented and the nature of the crowd to which he seemingly belonged.

⁷³ ‘The Unemployed in London’, *The Times*, 9 February 1886, p.6.

The sound of the crowd

After Captain Allistoun accuses Wait of ‘shamming sick’, Donkin acts as the mouthpiece for the crew, rather like an orator rallying the crowd: “‘We’ve got to say somethink about that,’” screeched Donkin from the rear’ (120). The individual sailors that Allistoun must now confront have merged into a mass, and Conrad’s aural impressions work to subsume the individuality of the sailors into a composite of ‘mixed growls and screeches’, ‘menacing mutters’ and ‘gesticulating shadows that growled, hissed, laughed excitedly’ (121). There is an impression of movement within the crowd, suggestive of an army about to march: ‘a dark mass stamped, eddied, advanced, retreated’ (122). The corporality of such a description reinforces the crowd as a separate phenomenon, within which the voice of the individual is no longer discernible until a leader emerges to act as a mouthpiece. As Allan Simmons notes, the crew have become ‘non-verbal’ in this scene.⁷⁴ Simmons interprets this as a narrative experimentation which is at play elsewhere in this work, arguing that the purpose of this is to express different representations of the crew as the ‘simple and voiceless’, as Conrad had termed the ‘disregarded multitude’ in the Preface (viii). To extend this reading, it is surely significant that Conrad puts aside the voice of the sailor-narrator in this episode, in favour of an apparently omnipresent narrator, to explicitly emphasize the impression of a mass or mob, over which Captain Allistoun must re-assert his authority.

The crowd need to be contained within the spaces of the ship, rather as the police battled to curtail the Trafalgar Square protesters during the riots

⁷⁴ Allan H. Simmons, ‘Representing “the simple and the voiceless”: Story-telling in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*’, *The Conradian*, 24:1 (1999) 43-57 (p.45).

of the 1880s. The manner in which the sound of the sailors' mutinous sentiments breaks out in random form is also reminiscent of the type of gathering which used to take place on the streets around the Docks in this period:

Two men discussed familiarly, striking one another's breast in turn, to clinch arguments. Three others, with their heads in a bunch, spoke all together with a confidential air, and at the top of their voices. It was a stormy chaos of speech where intelligible fragments tossing, struck the ear. (128)

In his reaction to this near-mutiny, Allistoun expresses a sense of puzzlement. He recalls a mutiny of his youth, a 'real mutiny', when the aims of the men were clear: 'they wanted to broach the cargo and get at the liquor. Very simple....' (137). In contrast, the crew of the *Narcissus* are something of a mystery. 'Queer lot' (137), Allistoun observes, of a crew whose discontent and intentions are hard to understand. However, as the sailor-narrator ultimately decides, the crew were a 'good crowd' (173) and this is by dint of their hard work. These are the true workmen, who 'fisted with wild cries the beating canvas of a heavy foresail; or tossing aloft, invisible in the night, gave back yell for yell to a westerly gale' (173). These are the sounds of their engagement with the business of keeping the ship afloat.

In contrast, Donkin's disinclination to work, together with his violent tendencies, mark him out as different from the rest of the crew. When Allistoun discovers that Donkin had hurled the belaying-pin, the crew of the *Narcissus* dissociate themselves from this type of mob behaviour: 'We ain't that kind!' (123). Donkin is a 'man of the crowd', but of a type that Conrad arguably sought to know and to understand, as well as to despise. It is notable that, at the beginning of the voyage, the crew are not sure what to make of Donkin. One of them asks, 'What are you?' (11), causing Donkin to assert his Englishness. Such feelings of ambiguity are also present in a comment made by one of the crew when Wait goes overboard. None of the crew anticipate

that Donkin will do anything about it: ““Nobody expects you to,” growled the man next to him; “you’re only a thing””(64). In a letter discussing his unsuccessful attempts at capturing the phonetics of Cockney speech, Conrad echoes such ambiguities: ‘But God only knows what Donkin is’ (CL7 174).

Donkin’s ‘difference’ also becomes apparent in fictional terms, when he is compared to a Cockney contemporary like Huish, the clerk in Stevenson’s *The Ebb-Tide* (1894). Stevenson’s characterization of Huish presents a vivid portrait of a social type familiar to a contemporary audience. Stevenson made full use of the stereotype. While, for example, Conrad alludes to popular performance through his characterization of Donkin, Stevenson makes explicit associations, describing Huish as singing ‘a piece of the chorus of a comic song which he must have heard twenty years before in London: meaningless gibberish’.⁷⁵ The American novelist and journalist Harold Frederic made an unfavourable comparison between Stevenson’s Huish and Conrad’s Donkin, considering the latter to be a less effectively realized characterization: ‘the cockney loafer and ruffian Donkin, although given by far the largest “speaking part” of the lot, remains shadowy’.⁷⁶ This suggests that Conrad had produced a nuanced characterization that extended beyond the socio-political stereotype of the belligerent Cockney, and instead expressed some of the contemporary sense of puzzlement towards this figure and what he represented. Indeed, Margaret Harkness’s description of the ‘East End loafer’ on the Whitechapel Road could refer to Donkin, with his ‘parasitic’ mentality, and her comment that his mind is ‘unknown as yet to psychologists’ seemingly echoes Conrad’s own feelings of ambiguity towards this social type.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne, *The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and Quartette* (London: Heinemann, 1914), p.141.

⁷⁶ Harold Frederic, unsigned review, in *Saturday Review*, 12 February 1898, p.211, in Norman Sherry, ed., *Conrad: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 98-100 (p.100).

⁷⁷ Harkness, *In Darkest London*, pp.3-4.

As I have discussed in the Introduction, London now sought in civic terms to be a quieter city, and the noisy crowds at Trafalgar Square and elsewhere posed a challenge to this. Rowdiness and behaviour perceived to be emotional, rather than ‘reasonable’, ought now to be relegated to the past, according to this new urban model, and this applied to jingoistic outbreaks of mass celebration as much as to disorderly demonstrations. The puzzled reaction of an upper-middle-class observer and listener to such mass gatherings is typified by John Galsworthy in an episode of *In Chancery* (1920), a work dedicated to Conrad and his wife Jessie. Soames Forsyte encounters a mystifying crowd during the Mafeking celebrations of 1900:

He wandered thus one May night into Regent Street and the most amazing crowd he had ever seen: a shrieking, whistling, dancing, jostling, grotesque and formidably jovial crowd, with false noses and mouth-organs [...] Who were these people, what were they, where had they come from into the West End? ⁷⁸

Soames reacts to the crowd in terms suggestive of a social invasion, in which the mobs from the East End have made their way to the West End. The trope of the working-class invasion was a familiar one in late nineteenth-century social commentary.⁷⁹ However, it is notable that Soames is also puzzled by this scene:

But more than dread, he felt a deep surprise. They were hysterical – it wasn’t English! [...] Restraint, reserve! Those qualities more dear to him almost than life, those indispensable attributes of property and culture, where were they! It wasn’t English! No, it wasn’t English! [...] It was like discovering that nine-tenths of the people of England were foreigners! ⁸⁰

The crowd was ostensibly easy to quantify as the massed ranks of the working-classes, whose seeming predilection for disorder, according to the

⁷⁸ Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga*, p.524.

⁷⁹ As Ruth Livesey has discussed, the idea that hordes from the East End would rise up and overwhelm civilization occurs in Charles Booth’s accounts of the poor. See Livesey, ‘Reading for Character: Women Social Reformers and Narratives of the Poor in Late Victorian and Edwardian London’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9:1 (2004), 43-67 (p.4).

⁸⁰ Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga*, pp.524-5.

establishment view, presented a clear threat. However, it also posed a puzzle, as Captain Allistoun's reaction to the crew of the *Narcissus* suggests.

The zealous cook Podmore is another man of the crowd. As Hampson has argued, Podmore is an inherently disruptive figure who, like Donkin, challenges the natural order of the ship.⁸¹ Podmore is another opportunistic crowd-gatherer, whose random sermonizing exemplifies the 'open-air' culture of the streets, as the sailor-narrator observes 'Whenever he saw three or four of us standing together he would leave his stove, to run out and preach' (38).⁸² Like Donkin, Podmore brings street life on board ship. There was a strong missionary presence around the Docks and in response to the problems of drunkenness in the Poplar and Limehouse areas, missionaries and Board of Trade officials were allowed to board ships to preach the virtues of temperance to the crews, as Booth's observers record.⁸³ Podmore's own youthful excesses with alcohol have led to his conversion to religion. Belfast comments 'We're all taytottlers here' (63) which elicits a knowing laugh from the sailors. No doubt Conrad heard similar rebuttals on board ship as his crew-mates attempted to deter these sermonizing outsiders. As Alston Kennerley has noted, religious meetings would also have featured at the Well Street Sailors' Home near Tower Hill where Conrad stayed at various times during his career at sea.⁸⁴ The sailors' homes were originally set up with a religious mission but by Conrad's time, however, the Christian mission appears to have been less overt: praising the Well Street Home in 1912 in 'A Friendly Place', he found a 'regard for the independence of the men who sought its shelter ashore' and 'no ulterior aims' (*NLL* 203).

⁸¹ Hampson, *Betrayal and Identity*, p.104.

⁸² Conrad parodies Podmore with a biblical reference: 'For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them' (Matthew 18:20).

⁸³ Notebook B346 (1897), Police Notebooks from the Working Papers for Charles Booth's *Survey of Life and Labour*.

⁸⁴ Alston Kennerley, 'Joseph Conrad and the London Sailor's Home', *The Conradian*, 33:1 (2008), 69-102 (p.83).

It is such ‘ulterior aims’ that render Donkin and Podmore as outsiders: ironically the most loquacious of the crew, they are shut out from the camaraderie of shipboard banter. Early on in the novel, we see them as listening bystanders: ‘The cook approached to hear [...] like a conceited saint’ (32), while Donkin ‘solitary and brooding [...] moved closer to catch the drift of the discussion below him’ (32-33). Later, they are depicted as outsiders again, experiencing their own moment of fellowship together as they ‘bewailed the immorality of the ship’s company’ (144). Wait is described in similar terms. In the isolation of his cabin, he ‘listened with avidity’ to the ‘slightest sound’ of the ship’s material and human murmurings (104). Like Donkin and Podmore, he is inherently a creature of the crowd and the street, rather than the ship. He is recognizable as a sailor familiar with, for example, the temptations of shore life, such as the prostitutes of Canton Street, near the East India Docks. Wait can be imagined, ‘swaggering up the East India Dock Road’ (149), as he himself recalls. However, while this is clear from the narration, Wait is an ambiguous figure to the crew themselves. Conrad foregrounds not what Wait is, but what he appears to be from the crew’s viewpoint. This appears to have been his deliberate intention; in the 1914 Author’s Note to the novella, he wrote of Wait, ‘in the book he is nothing, he is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology’.⁸⁵

While Donkin is a professional agitator and Podmore is a familiarly religious zealot, Wait is harder for the ship’s crew to place. Through a characterization which alludes both to a racist term and to its theatrical by-product – the ‘nigger minstrel’ – Conrad also offers an ambiguously theatrical presentation of a black man, whom the crew must struggle to identify. Donkin and Podmore voice creeds to ascribe to or to reject but

⁸⁵ Quoted by Watt, p.109.

Wait offers nothing, except his sickness, which may or may not be a performance – a ‘sham’.

Jeremy Hawthorn has commented on possible allusions to the minstrels in the characterization of Wait, noting Conrad’s use of the term ‘repulsive mask’ (18) which is suggestive of the process of ‘blacking up’.⁸⁶ Hawthorn suggests that through such a term Conrad may be expressing some of the Victorian ambiguities towards the black physiognomy, as the word ‘mask’ implies that these features are not quite human. The former reading seems the more likely. It is notable that on his first appearance, in the lamplight, Wait’s hands ‘were big and seemed gloved’, suggesting the costume of the minstrel, and furthermore he announces himself with a ‘sonorous voice’ (17). Indeed, we hear the tone of Wait’s voice throughout this novella, from the listening-point both of the omniscient narrator, and through the first-person narration of the unidentified fellow sailor. Wait’s voice is, variously, ‘deep, rolling’ (18), has an ‘even intonation’ (19), is ‘hollow and loud’ (35). Overall, its main characteristic is of the ‘fine baritone’ (119). Here, instead of presenting such a voice as an indicator of a deceptive personality, as Hawthorn suggests, it seems more probable that Conrad expresses those stereotypical qualities of the black man’s voice most exaggerated in minstrel performance.

Elsewhere, Tim Middleton has argued for Wait as the ‘dandy’, a figure personified by Oscar Wilde, who attracted as much disapprobation from the establishment as the type of working-class ‘hooligan’ suggested by Conrad’s characterization of Donkin.⁸⁷ For the imperialist observer, both figures augured a threat to English dominance on the world’s stage as they seemingly evidenced, to use Middleton’s terms, ‘a morbid decline of

⁸⁶ Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad*, pp.127-8.

⁸⁷ Tim Middleton, ‘From Mimicry to Menace: Conrad and Late-Victorian Masculinity’, in *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature*, ed. by Philip Holden and Richard J. Ruppel (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp.135-51 (p.144).

manhood'.⁸⁸ The dandy, like the Cockney loafer, was also characterized by a disinclination to work, and both figures, like the minstrel, were stock characters of music-hall. As Middleton argues, Conrad engages with different representations of masculinity in this novella. To extend this reading, Conrad also foregrounds some social nuances surrounding the nature of 'employment' in a period when the term 'unemployed' was still relatively new.⁸⁹ Through the crew's discussion about the 'characteristics of a gentleman' (32), for example, ship-board and office work are contrasted. As Knowles asserts, gentlemen spend a lot of time 'sitting down in offices' (32) which presents a vision of idleness if contrasted with the hard labour demanded by life on a ship. However, Wait's own inactivity suggests a performance rather than the characteristics of a specific social type. As the sailor-narrator describes, Wait 'paraded' (36) the prospect of his death before the crew. It is notable that Archie, the concertina-playing performer on the *Narcissus*, is especially unnerved by Wait, whom he describes as 'an uncanny joker' (36). Archie puts aside his concertina and there are 'no songs and no music in the evening' (36). The ship has become Wait's 'platform', as it has for Donkin and Podmore.

On his death-bed, Wait is described as making a 'frantic dumb show of speech' (151); this is performative imagery in a scenario where his illness is revealed not to have been a performance at all: Wait has been pretending to be pretending to die. Wait has thus been 'shamming' the 'shammer', an interesting double duplicity in a period when the London streets (with which, as noted above, Conrad has associated Wait) provided a stage where nationality and culture were often embedded into an 'act'. Wait's presence in the text, together with the crew's reaction, thereby alerts Conrad's readership to those ambiguities. For example, the white 'nigger minstrel'

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ See Wilson, *The Victorians*, p.36, who notes that the word was coined during Gladstone's second period as Prime Minister between 1880-85.

had to put on a cultural act, which encompassed stereotypical qualities of indolence, but also expressed a pathos which engaged sympathy and thereby extracted some money from the passing crowd. As an account in Sims's *Living London* relates, the minstrel 'must blacken his face and hands, don a negligent costume suggestive of a seaside lounge, and arm himself with banjo or violin' rather like the 'street Irishman', who donned a hat, whiskers, and vermillion face paint.⁹⁰

Street begging was also a performative art. The term 'shammers', as Jerry White has discussed, was used to describe the professional street beggars who had a range of 'lays' or 'lurks'.⁹¹ As a survey of vagrancy and begging from 1887 explains, these included the 'shipwrecked or disabled sailors' lurk' and the 'sick lurk'.⁹² There is an indication of Conrad's familiarity with this manifestation of street life in *Chance*, in the episode where Powell recalls his encounter with the criminals who hung around the dock-side streets. As the dock policeman describes, there were the 'regular boys' (24) who offered their bag-carrying services to unsuspecting sailors. The policeman suggests to the 'big ruffian' encountered by Powell that he is 'on the honest lay', not being 'game' and not having the 'nerve' for such trickery (24-25). Conrad thus alludes to the artifice of street life which contrasts with the work ethic on board ship.

From the viewpoint of the sailor-narrator, which, in this instance, can perhaps be presumed as Conrad's own, Wait has been 'demoralising' (139) because he has worked the crowd of the ship, rather in the manner of the politician and the social reformer, or 'millionaire' businessman of the new age. The latter term suggests an Andrew Carnegie figure perhaps, who offers a combination of philanthropic virtue and means of self-improvement:

⁹⁰ P.F. William Ryan, 'London's Street Performers', in *Living London*, Vol. 3 (1903), ed. by Sims, pp.63-68 (p.65).

⁹¹ Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp.204-205.

⁹² C.J. Ribton-Turner, *A History of Vagrants and Vagrancy and Beggars and Begging* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1887), p.311.

‘We made a chorus of affirmation to his wildest assertions, as though he had been a millionaire, a politician, or a reformer – and we a crowd of ambitious lubbers’ (139). As Donovan has discussed, Carnegie’s *The Gospel of Wealth* had been published in 1889, and Conrad had no doubt read about the labour disputes at Carnegie’s company US Steel, which were reported in the British Press in the 1890s.⁹³ Like the religiously-minded social reformer, Carnegie had a ‘gospel’ to promote and he represented another manifestation of the modern platform on which a powerful speaker might engender a ‘chorus of affirmation’ from a gullible crowd.

As Michael Levenson has noted, Conrad was not alone in representing the sounds of the mutinous crowd: Levenson cites the hootings, jeerings and hissings of the ‘sound of reform’ in the work of Matthew Arnold, George Eliot and Thomas Carlyle.⁹⁴ Conrad’s crowd is represented as a composite of roars, hoots, jeers and screeches, while he seems to have likened its single note to the derivative and iterative expression of the parrot. On the *Narcissus*, Wait confronts Donkin with the vacuity of his orations: ‘You’re like a poll-parrot, like a screechin’ poll parrot’ (110). This is an early expression of a metaphor which would recur in Conrad’s work to describe language which had become bereft of meaning. As the narrator of *Under Western Eyes* expresses, language has the potential to subvert rather than to liberate and to reduce man to ‘a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot’ (3). In *Nostramo* (1904), Conrad juxtaposes the screeching of ‘Viva Costaguana’ by the Goulds’ parrot with a conversation where Charles Gould comments about the ‘clap-trap eloquence’ of the American businessman Holroyd (83). Such a cultural connection is consistent with a contemporary perception that tours by visiting speakers from the USA may have influenced oratory in Great Britain, making popular

⁹³ See Donovan, pp. 130; 206.

⁹⁴ See Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of Literary Doctrine, 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.32.

the type of over-impassioned speeches through which might be heard the triumph of style over content.⁹⁵ Conrad made his own, belated, foray into public speaking in the USA in 1923. In a letter to Bruno Winawer that year, Conrad describes feeling as if he was in a ‘cloud of idealistic phrases’ whilst in the USA, and that the type of speech he encountered there reminded him of ‘a well-trained parrot. It gives me the shivers’ (CL8 173). This recalls the comments that Conrad had made in 1897 about Alvan Hervey in ‘The Return’. In a letter to Edward Garnett, he describes how he had sought to convey the ‘effect of insincerity, of artificiality’, and thus to make his readers ‘shudder’ (CL1 387).

John Galsworthy recollects that ‘cheap-jackery and clap-trap of all sorts drew from [Conrad] a somewhat violently expressed detestation’.⁹⁶ Such an antipathy no doubt derived from Conrad’s awareness of the power of this ‘clap-trap’: in ‘The Nursery of the Craft’ (1906), he writes of the potential of ‘cheap oratory’ to stir up the fears and antagonisms which could ultimately lead to war (MoS 149). In *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, Conrad’s use of the term ‘impassioned’ to describe Donkin’s ‘orations’ further expresses his dislike of the type of eloquence which was rooted in emotionalism rather than reason. This is particularly reflected in his response to H.G. Wells’s lecture ‘The Discovery of the Future’, which was given at the Royal Institution in 1902:

The lecture is splendid. It is striking in its *expression* and as nearly perfect as things of today can be in its tone and temper; and in its eloquence too, which is undeniable and of a sort most attractive to me.

⁹⁵ See Meisel and also Oliver (p.107) who suggests that Gladstone’s oratorical style was believed to have been influenced by the American evangelists Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey who had toured Great Britain in the mid-1870s. The evangelical style of such speakers is parodied by Joyce in the ‘Circe’ episode of *Ulysses*, through the appearance of Alexander Gordon Dowie, the faith healer and founder of the Christian Catholic Church who had visited London in 1903 and 1904 (James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁹⁶ John Galsworthy, ‘Reminiscences of Conrad’ in *Castles in Spain & other screeds* (London: Heinemann, 1927), p.92.

I call it scientific eloquence – that is eloquence appealing not to the passions like the eloquence of the orator but to the reason.
(CL2 386)⁹⁷

Conrad's engagement with the 'attractions and perils of charismatic eloquence', to use Cedric Watts's terms, is especially apparent in *Heart of Darkness*, through the characterization of Kurtz.⁹⁸ Kurtz's 'pamphlet', which is itself suggestive of the cheaply distributed tract, has an 'argument' about the suppression of 'savages', but what is most notable for Marlow is the rhetorical nature of the language used, which gives way to the 'unbounded power of eloquence' (95). Marlow's reaction to Kurtz's 'report' may reflect Conrad's own attitudes towards this manifestation of 'cheap oratory' in print form – it should be consigned to the 'dustbin of progress' (96). Indeed, Kurtz has a power which might be regarded as peculiarly modern. Like the charismatic speakers of his age, he is capable of a performance, and of setting off a metaphorical 'witch dance' amongst the 'rudimentary souls' (96) in his audience. However, it is notable that, as Rubery has discussed, Conrad describes *Heart of Darkness* as a 'wild story of a journalist' in a letter of 1902 to Henry-Durand Davray (CL2 407).⁹⁹ Rubery interrogates Conrad's use of the term 'journalist' and argues that Kurtz uses the newspapers as a means for disseminating his ideas in a style which may be equated to that of the special correspondent, for whom persuasive rhetoric was more important than straightforward reportage.¹⁰⁰ It is instructive to ask another question: what sort of 'worker' is Kurtz? Marlow is ambiguous about this matter, his terms merely suggesting that there is something of the picturesque about Kurtz's possible employment

⁹⁷ Conrad's use of the present tense suggests that he had read rather than heard this lecture, which was rushed into book form by Fisher Unwin. See Patrick Parrinder, 'Introduction', *The Discovery of the Future* by H.G. Wells (London: PNL Press, 1989), pp. 7-18 (p.17).

⁹⁸ Cedric Watts, 'Introduction', *Heart of Darkness and Other Tales*, ed. by Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.xi-xxviii (p.xix).

⁹⁹ See Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp.141-58.

¹⁰⁰ Rubery, p.157.

as a journalist / painter. However, as I have argued in the Introduction, it is the suggestion of a journalist colleague that Kurtz ought have been a populist politician which is highly significant. Najder has suggested that Conrad read Le Bon's *The Crowd* and that this informed his attitude towards the mob.¹⁰¹ In this episode of *Heart of Darkness*, it is interesting how Conrad, through Marlow, seemingly makes a conflation between journalism and demagoguery. This is consistent with Le Bon's suggestion that the role of the popular orator could be taken over by the press:

The majority of men, especially among the masses, do not possess clear and reasoned ideas on any subject whatever outside their own speciality. The leader serves them as a guide. It is just possible that he may be replaced, though very inefficiently, by the periodical publications which manufacture opinions for their readers and supply them with ready-made phrases which absolve them of the trouble of reasoning.¹⁰²

Furthermore, as Peter McDonald has discussed, other social commentators familiar to Conrad, such as W.H. Henley, perceived a particular threat from popular demagoguery.¹⁰³

In *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, Conrad makes reference to Samuel Plimsoll, who is an interesting figure in this context due to his reputation for using language which appealed to his audiences' emotions and sentimental patriotism. Like John Burns, Plimsoll was a well-known orator of his time. Plimsoll, a devout Christian, was another 'self-made' man who had honed his oratorical skills at a young age, in this case through writing speeches for his employer.¹⁰⁴ Plimsoll was a frequent speaker in the East End in the 1870s, going on to become the first President of the National and Amalgamated Sailor and Fireman's Union in 1887. In this

¹⁰¹ See Zdzisław Najder, *Joseph Conrad: A Life*, trans. by Halina Najder (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2007), p.106.

¹⁰² Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: T.Fisher Unwin, 1903), p.99-100.

¹⁰³ McDonald, p.43.

¹⁰⁴ See David Masters, *The Plimsoll Mark* (London: Cassell, 1955).

capacity, he drove through the major maritime reform known as the ‘Plimsoll Line’ which prevented the overloading of ships. In ‘Certain Aspects of the Admiral Enquiry into the Loss of the “Titanic”’ (1912), Conrad acknowledged that the issue of overloaded ships was a worthy one for Plimsoll to have ‘uplifted his voice about’ (*NLL* 188). However, the cameo of the ‘Plimsoll man’ in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* is less sympathetic. There, Knowles relates the tale of a ‘fatherly old gentleman’ (107) who was being paid to find overloaded ships. As Knowle recalls, the Plimsoll man used sentimentalized language which was aimed at stirring a sense of injustice amongst the crew: ‘Said as how it was crool hard to be drowned in winter just for the sake of a few pounds more for the owner’ (107). The self-interest of the Plimsoll man led to their ship being wrongly identified, with the outcome that the sailors had suffered: having thought that they were at liberty to go on a ‘spree’, they ended up spending six weeks in prison (107). Already at the mercy of ship-owners who actually did overload their ships, the hard-working sailor was at risk of getting embroiled in another form of exploitation, which derived, in turn, from another ‘worker’. The Plimsoll man was, as Knowles recounts, ‘on pay and allowance from some kind people’ (107) to identify as many overloaded ships as he could.

Knowles’s description of the language of this man is consistent with Plimsoll’s own reputation for sentimental exaggeration. Plimsoll’s overblown style language made the news in 1880, when he had distributed handbills with inflammatory language about his political opponents. This led to a House of Commons discussion about, as *The Times* asked, ‘what should be done with a philanthropist who will use violent epithets’.¹⁰⁵ Conrad was in London at the time, and is therefore likely to have read

¹⁰⁵ Editorial, *The Times*, 21 February 1880, p.10.

about this.¹⁰⁶ Plimsoll's reputation was also damaged by suggestions of his gullibility (some of the stories of hardship told to him later proved to be fictional), by economy with the truth, and, perhaps most damningly from Conrad's perspective, the type of 'impassioned oration' combined with patriotic pride which Donkin tries to deploy on the *Narcissus*, whose crew are international. Plimsoll's *An appeal on behalf of Our Seamen* (1873) gives an indication of his sentimental and patriotic style. He cites a letter from 'An English Mother' who had lost her son at sea: 'it makes my heart burn to think that English lads by scores, like my own son, are sent out to perish in rotten tubs'.¹⁰⁷ Plimsoll then asks his readers:

Does not the reading of these testimonies to the gallantry and self-devotion of our fellow-countrymen at sea, cause all our hearts to beat high with pride that the fame of England is thus upheld in the eyes of other nations?¹⁰⁸

Plimsoll makes a 'cry' which is consistent with the style of the social reformer in the 1880s and 1890s, as typified by Andrew Mearns's famous study *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) and echoed in socialist publications like *The Workers' Cry*. In his descriptions of Donkin's complaints, it is notable that Conrad uses the word 'whine', which also becomes the defining sound of the new generation of sailors: 'if they had learned how to speak, they have also learned how to whine' (25). This was also, as the third-person narration asserts, how the philanthropists and politicians of the era like Plimsoll represented them: 'Well-meaning people had tried to represent those men as whining over every mouthful of their food; as going about their work in fear of their lives' (25).

McDonald argues that, in his attempts to gain the admiration of W.H. Henley and his right-wing circles, Conrad represents the crew of the

¹⁰⁶ See Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, p.39.

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Plimsoll, *An appeal on behalf of Our Seamen* (London: Virtue and Co, 1873), p.25.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

Narcissus as the type of intellectually challenged working-class crowd vulnerable to being stirred up by powerful speakers.¹⁰⁹ However, Conrad's opinions about how the popular demagogue might convert people to his cause, and the implied relationship between this and the stupidity of his audience, are arguably rather more complex. It is useful to look beyond *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* to a work such as 'The Informer' which indicates that Conrad's perspective on the process by which people turned to socialism and even anarchism was far removed from the sureties of Henley and his circle. For Conrad, the influence of the demagogue may be located in the frailties of the human condition, which rendered all classes vulnerable. For the upper-classes, a combination of shallowness (a lack of what might nowadays be termed as 'emotional intelligence'), a misplaced earnestness, and a simple desire to be in fashion, could all lead to women like 'our young Lady Amateur of anarchism' (*SoS* 84) being influenced in this way. As 'Mr X' observes:

Even in England, where you have some common-sense, a demagogue has only to shout loud enough and long enough to find some backing in the very class he is shouting at. [...] The demagogue carries the amateurs of emotion with him. Amateurism in this, that, and the other thing is a delightfully easy way of killing time, and feeding one's own vanity – the silly vanity of being abreast with the ideas of the day after to-morrow. (*SoS* 78)

It is significant that the crew of the *Narcissus* are not influenced by Donkin, nor are they converted by Podmore, whose presence on the ship is little more than an irritant. After Donkin's failed attempt to stir up a mutiny, a peaceful orderliness descends: the 'silent crowd that watched him' ignore his screaming imprecations that they shouldn't stand by and watch him being 'bullied' (136) by Captain Allistoun and Mr Creighton.

¹⁰⁹ See McDonald, p.61.

The crew are also only temporarily in the thrall of Wait, who had been, as the boatswain comments, ‘bullying all that softy crowd’ (161).

In the novella’s final section, impressions of work and commerce predominate as the *Narcissus* sails towards London. As the *Narcissus* approaches London, she passes a ‘crowd’ of buildings, a term which expresses the city’s claustrophobia, while the ‘cloud’ of smoke over it impedes the vision of what lies beyond (163). The corresponding auralness is of the ‘immense and lamentable murmur’ (163-64) of the vast human crowd; as in the mutiny scene, Conrad uses the omnipresent narration to emphasize the extent to which the individual is subsumed by the immensity of the city. The sound is likened to an enormous human heartbeat, but this is not the sound of life so much as a weary exhalation. Conrad’s impressions of London’s commerce suggest an exhausting round of frenetic dock-side activity: ‘on all sides there was the clang of iron, the sound of mighty blows, shrieks, yells’ (164). In earshot of this, the dock-side crowd are reduced to reactive bystanders: ‘The crowd murmured, stamped where they stood’ (164). This auralness suggests that the price paid for London’s imperial project was costly indeed.

Singleton’s ‘long record’ of ‘faithful work’ (172) at sea has a simplicity and nobility which contrasts with this frenetic and mindless urban clamour. It also contrasts with the future that the sailor-narrator imagines for Donkin. Donkin’s ‘filthy eloquence’ (172) will not ‘earn’ him a living in the literal sense; this expresses his misplaced sense of entitlement to his ‘rights’, rather than duties and responsibilities. Unlike the loquacious Donkin and Podmore: ‘The thoughts of all his [Singleton’s] lifetime could have been expressed in six words’ (26). Singleton epitomizes a wiser age, which did not depend on the vacuous ‘saying’ or derivative epigram of the platform. Singleton’s inability to write, a failing which by the mid-1880s is sufficient to shock the pay clerk into dismissing him as a ‘disgusting old brute’

(169), further establishes a contrast between what is valued at sea, as opposed to what is valued out on the London streets.

Once back on shore, the crew are assailed by an unnerving blur and blend of visual and aural impressions:

Outside, on Tower Hill, they blinked, hesitated clumsily, as if blinded by the strange quality of the hazy light, as if discomposed by the view of so many men; and they who could hear one another in the howl of gales seemed deafened and distracted by the dull roar of the busy earth. (170)

The sounds of the sea were discrete, and within the ‘howl’ it was possible to hear an individual voice; in contrast, the town’s ‘dull roar’ is an aural composite, not necessarily noisier, but more psychologically distracting. Singleton, with his ‘attentive face’, can be relied upon to navigate the ship safely through the ‘din and tumult’ (89) of a storm. However, the ‘sea of life’ encountered on the shore defies meaningful audition: ‘the sea of life thundered into their ears ceaseless and unheeded’ (171).

As the Preface to *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* makes clear, Conrad regarded himself as a ‘workman of art’ (xi). The linguistic expression of this workmanship expressed itself through his painstaking attention to sense impressions, to creating the ‘shape and ring of sentences’, and a ‘magic suggestiveness’ which worked, if only for an instant, to transform the ‘commonplace surface of words’ (ix). Conrad began his writing career as the commonplace sentiment and idiomatically expressed idea were increasingly disseminated through the popular press but also, as this chapter has discussed, through the popular oratory of the time. In Donkin, Conrad had created a ‘consummate artist’ (100) who treated the ship as his platform. Conrad was equally antipathetic towards the notion of a work of art that took to a figurative platform through overtly preaching a moral message, a trend typified by the best-selling populist writer Hall Caine. Indeed, Conrad’s Preface, with its foregrounding of the aesthetics of sense

impressionism, could be read as a riposte to the project of Caine, who in 1890 had written in the *Contemporary Review* about the ‘moral effects of good literature’.¹¹⁰ Caine would later speak of his ideal novel as ‘a compound of the plain nineteenth-century realism of the penny newspaper and the pure and lofty idealism of the Sermon of the Mount’.¹¹¹

Conrad completed the Preface in August 1897, the month when Caine was much in the news due to the publication of his sermonizing novel *The Christian*. This was a novel both featuring a preacher and itself preaching about the ills of the modern age, as I will discuss further in the next chapter. Caine was a Christian Socialist, a movement about which Conrad’s views are arguably made clear through the characterizations of Podmore and Donkin. Between June–July 1897, ‘An Outpost of Progress’ had been published in *Cosmopolis*, and Conrad would probably have seen Andrew Lang’s review of *The Christian* in the August edition. Conrad’s dislike of Caine is well-known and he would have concurred with Lang’s response to this novel: ‘The moral purpose and the art, like that of a flamboyant “poster,” may charm the illiterate, and the Press may be as complaisant as usual; but literature has no concern with such a work as *The Christian*’.¹¹²

As a letter to Cunninghame Graham in February 1899 indicates, Conrad also preferred to keep his distance from actual platforms:

If you want me to come I want still more to hear you. But – I am not a peace man, nor a democrat (I don’t know what the word means really) and if I come I shall go into the body of the hall. I want to hear you – just as I want always to read you. (CL2 158)

¹¹⁰ Hall Caine, ‘The New Watchwords of Fiction’, *Contemporary Review*, April 1890, 479-88 (p.479).

¹¹¹ Caine was speaking at a lecture in Edinburgh in 1894: quoted by Norman N. Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late-Victorian Novel* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p.115.

¹¹² Andrew Lang, ‘Notes on New Books’, *Cosmopolis*, August 1897, p.85. Caine was later satirized as the populist writer Callan in *The Inheritors* (1901), a collaborative work by Conrad and Ford. When responding to a reviewer of *The Inheritors*, Conrad made clear his belief that fiction which sought to promote a point of view was not art: ‘the business of a work striving to be art is not to prophesy’ (CL2: 348).

Graham was speaking at a peace meeting organised by the SDF and Conrad goes on to express his reluctance to be viewed as an ‘accomplice’ and part of a ‘fraternity’ which includes the ‘westerners whom I so dislike.’ As Karl and Davies note, the ‘westerners’ may refer to the Germans, or to the Russians: the latter were due to be on the platform with Graham (*CL2* 158n). While the precise terms of Conrad’s comment in this letter are ambiguous, they allude to a general disinclination to take to the platform in both the literal and figurative sense. Furthermore, Conrad’s comments about ‘democracy’ echo Le Bon’s observations that the oratorical ‘science of employing words’ like ‘democracy’ and ‘socialism’ had led to these changing their original meaning.¹¹³ For Conrad, like his contemporaries, the platform was a site of modernity, where language was used without attention to meaning, through oratory which sought to persuade through delivery as much as content.

¹¹³ Le Bon, *The Crowd*, p.122.

Chapter 2

Silence and Noise in ‘The Return’

While Donkin may be associated with the noisy soundscapes of Tower Hill and the Mile End Waste, Alvan Hervey, in ‘The Return’, is at home in a respectably silent West End square. Excepting his description of Hervey’s short walk home from the underground station, Conrad locates this story entirely indoors. Whereas Donkin personifies the noisy chaos of London’s streets and open spaces, Hervey’s appearance and manner is, at the outset of the story, entirely in keeping with a well-appointed and orderly middle-class domestic interior. However, Donkin and Hervey share one similarity. They are both preoccupied with the idea of ‘rights’ in a city where, as the singing of the ‘Marseillaise’ had come to express, the sound of a revolutionary spirit was hard to ignore. In their account of the Dock Strike, Smith and Nash observe how in the City ‘the windows rattled’ with the sound of the ‘Marseillaise’ as the dockers marched through the streets.¹ For the type of wealthy City businessman that Hervey personifies, these were times of uncertainty and suspicion. During the 1890s, as Hampson has noted, London was still ‘open’ to social revolutionaries and political refugees from Europe and as such was a centre for anarchist activity.²

¹ Smith and Nash, p.90. The singing of the ‘Marseillaise’ is mentioned frequently in contemporary accounts: see also John Ashton, *Hyde Park from Domesday-Book to Date* (London: Downey & Co., 1896), p.220. Scott notes (*The Singing Bourgeois*, pp.179-80) that the ‘Marseillaise’ had once been regarded as such a dangerous piece of music that English military bands were not allowed to play it until 1879.

² See Hampson, *Conrad’s Secrets* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.91-101. As Hampson discusses, the passing of the Aliens Bill in 1905 gave the Home Secretary the power to expel or deport immigrants. While there were campaigns to defend the right of asylum for political and religious

Traditional hierarchies and certainties were also being challenged through the gradual enhancement of women's rights. As Judith R. Walkowitz has discussed, there were significant legal advances for women in the 1880s, including the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 and, in 1888, the right to vote for membership of county councils.³ For the middle-class woman, independence could be expressed through playing a more prominent role in civic life, as is the experience of Mrs Hervey who, we learn, 'took up all manner of philanthropic work, and became a member of various rescuing and reforming societies' (*TU* 105). In the previous chapter, I have focused on male oratory, but it should be recalled that there were also 'platform women', as Walkowitz discusses.⁴ Women like Annie Besant broke down gender barriers through demonstrating a similar aptitude for 'showmanship' as their male counterparts, although it would seem that this was still a novel idea, even amongst liberal circles. In her correspondence Beatrice Webb observes the 'hidden masculinity' of her own husband's attitudes; Sidney Webb had evidently objected to his wife speaking at a Fabian meeting, leading her to comment: 'See how skin-deep are these professions of advanced opinion, with regard to women, among your leaders of the forward party!'⁵

The Herveys' wealth and social position are to some extent self-acquired not inherited: Hervey has mastered the 'art of making money' in the City (*TU* 104), while his wife is enjoying a home 'so much smarter than the parental one' (*TU* 106). Conrad clearly intended to emphasize

refugees, the protection of the country's borders thus took precedence. In 1906, the Aliens Act came into force.

³ Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp.64-65.

⁴ Walkowitz, p.67.

⁵ Letter to Edward Pease, of the Fabian Party, 18 April 1893, in *The Letters of Sidney & Beatrice Webb*, Vol. 2, ed. by Norman Mackenzie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.5.

the fashionable style of the Herveys' home. Contemporary magazines and catalogues feature glass-panelled wardrobes, three-part reflex mirrors attached to dressing-tables, and ornate lights of the type described in 'The Return'.⁶ The Herveys may be located, therefore, with an upwardly mobile class whose tastes were predictably bourgeois and who had much to fear from social revolution and the resultant loss of status and property. There is no rightful place for an 'unusual thing' (*TU* 108) in such an environment but this appears in the guise of a letter from Hervey's wife who has made her own bid for independence by leaving him. The psychological effect of this personal crisis on Hervey has been the focus for many of the readings of 'The Return'. This chapter will instead argue for the wider significance of Conrad's representation of the city, as expressed through the impressions of silence and noise which recur throughout the story. Firstly, however, it is useful to explore Conrad's representation of Hervey as a man of the crowd.

Hervey's world is about as far removed from the revolutionary city as it is possible to imagine: he has a 'career' (*TU* 114), a property cluttered with fashionable possessions, and a network of potentially profitable social connections. These include involvement with society-style politics: 'He took an active interest in politics; and having met quite by chance a literary man – who nevertheless was related to an earl – he was induced to finance a moribund society paper' (*TU* 105). However, from early on in this story, Conrad invites his readership to be suspicious of this ostensible security. Hervey has only a 'shadowy independence' (*TU* 108), like his reflections which are multiplied by the mirrors in his dressing-room. When he confronts his wife (on her return home), the muddled and seemingly derivative phrasing of Hervey's speech expresses his feelings

⁶ 'Hill's New Adjustable Reflex Mirrors' are advertised in the *Cabinet Maker & Art Furnisher*, June 1896, p.33 (V & A Theatre Collection).

of moral confusion. He appears to make a reference to the American Declaration of Independence, as he struggles to express notions about the rights and responsibilities of this class:

“For it is self-evident,” he went on with anxious vivacity, “it is self-evident that on the highest grounds we haven’t the right – no, we haven’t the right to intrude our miseries upon those who – who naturally expect better from us”. (*TU* 136)

At the beginning of ‘The Return’, there is a glimpse of a ‘disregarded little woman’ (*TU* 103) rushing into the third-class section of an underground train, reminding the story’s readership of the social segregation taking place in the city, and that ‘rights’, rather as in the American Declaration, could be an exclusive affair. Hervey is conscious of his social position and that it brings with it the responsibility to occupy a moral high ground: his wife’s extra-marital affair constitutes a social ‘scandal’ which is ‘disastrous for the morality’ (*TU* 136) of their whole class.

Allusions to independence are also suggested by the detailed and recurring descriptions of the lamp on the Herveys’ landing. This ‘marble woman, decently covered from neck to instep with stone draperies’ and with a ‘rigid white arm holding a cluster of lights’ (*TU* 107) might remind a contemporary readership of the Statue of Liberty, which had been unveiled in 1886, just twelve years before this story’s publication in the volume *Tales of Unrest*.⁷ This statue, a gift from France to America, commemorated the 1776 American War of Independence and symbolized France’s own revolutionary spirit. If intended, such symbolism is interesting, given both the ambiguities surrounding ‘rights’ for the

⁷ An advert for a lamp of similar appearance appears in the *Cabinet Maker & Art Furnisher*, July 1901, p.101 (V & A Theatre Collection). This post-dates the period of this story; however, Conrad’s inclusion of such details suggests an intention to emphasize that the Herveys’ home was fashionably ‘modern’.

English middle- and upper-classes in this period, and that Mrs Hervey has left the home (and subsequently returned to it) in what appears to have been her own failed bid for individual liberty.

Under siege from the new revolutionary spirit on the city's streets and the assertions of independence from the 'new woman', men of Hervey's class had their 'received beliefs' to fall back on; as he tells his wife, nothing that 'outrages' these beliefs can be 'right' (*TU* 131). Hervey arguably epitomizes the type of English 'democratic subject' defined by Patrick Joyce.⁸ Joyce argues that mid-nineteenth-century English discourse about democracy emphasized 'liberty', rather than 'fraternity', unlike in France, where the notion of a 'band of brothers' was part of the romance of revolution. In the 1860s, Joyce suggests, England's traditions and institutions had begun to function as a 'shorthand' for a constitution.⁹ Those who protected and adhered to these traditions by, for example, exercising public duty, could thus believe that they were in possession of 'moral rights'. According to the view of the political establishment, such rights were achievable through, to use Joyce's terms, 'full control of one's self, one's property, and one's labour'.¹⁰ Hervey personifies such control, as is consistent with his sense of moral rectitude. As he tells his wife: 'You must respect the moral foundations of a society that has made you what you are. Be true to it! That's duty – that's honour – that's honesty!' (*TU* 132). The Herveys' 'blessings of morality' (*TU* 131) derive from their engagement in public duty: Hervey's society paper is described as a 'virtuous undertaking' (*TU* 105), while, as noted above, Mrs Hervey is engaged in philanthropic work. Conrad thus locates Mrs Hervey as an independent woman outside the home. However,

⁸ Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.197.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.196.

independence and control were attributes which the dependent (including the poor and women) did not possess. Consistent with this status quo, and in comparison with her husband, Mrs Hervey does not have much of a voice inside the home. Having decided to return there, she is confronted by an angry husband whose wish is to ‘crush’ her by ‘a single sentence’ (TU 120), a suggestive reaction in a period when some women were increasingly ensuring that their opinions were heard. We do not learn much about her experience outside the home, but Mrs Hervey’s role there, as a listener to her husband’s lectures, certainly indicates her status within it.

As Celia Kingsbury has noted, ideas about ‘duty’ recur when Hervey lectures his wife about her moral shortcomings.¹¹ Above all, it is crucial for Hervey that his duties are undertaken with self-control and restraint, which is, as he tells his wife, ‘everything’ (TU 130). Such beliefs are enshrined for Hervey in his fashionable home, which materializes a ‘moral sweetness’ (TU 131). Hervey has much in common with John Galsworthy’s Soames Forsyte, the eponymous *Man of Property* (1906) in *The Forsyte Saga* for whom material acquisition equates to a religious creed, which, by the end of the nineteenth century was being severely shaken by the changing social order. As I have noted in the previous chapter, Soames’s own fears of disorder are described in Galsworthy’s later work *In Chancery* where Soames associates reserved and restrained behaviour with the possession of property and culture, attributes which the rowdy mob do not possess.

At the beginning of ‘The Return’, Conrad likens Hervey and his fellow City workers to a ‘band of brothers’ (TU 103). As the story unfolds, the

¹¹ Celia Kingsbury, “‘The Novelty of Real Feelings’: Restraint and Duty in Conrad’s “The Return””, *Conradiana*, 32:1 (2000), 31-40.

irony of this term becomes clear. There is no fraternity amongst this group. The atomization of urban life is apparent from the outset; once outside the entrance to the underground station, the men scatter ‘in all directions, walking fast from one another’ (*TU* 103). Like the crew of the *Narcissus*, the City businessmen disperse, although the speed with which they walk away from each other suggests the social reserve which had come to typify the English middle- and upper-classes. As Dale Kramer has noted, this type of crowd is signified through the multiplicity of mirror images in Hervey’s dressing-room.¹² To extend Kramer’s reading, this trope is also made apparent through the ‘crowd of houses’ (*TU* 131) in the Herveys’ neighbourhood, which repeats the imagery Conrad uses in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*. There, as I have noted in Chapter 1, the London crowd is materialized into a bricks and mortar mass which greets the home-coming traveller. The feelings of self-worth, moral rectitude and independence which Hervey derives from his home are treated ironically by Conrad throughout this story, in which the associative silence becomes sinister. The houses which surround Hervey’s home offer a deathlike servitude not independence: these are ‘flimsy and inscrutable graves of the living with their doors numbered like the doors of prison cells’ (*TU* 131).

Conrad emphasizes Hervey’s allegiance to the social habits of this urban crowd through the long passages of his disjointed and seemingly derivative speech. Hervey seeks comfort in the ‘clatter and glamour of phrases’ (*TU* 111) to the extent that he considers the death of his wife would have been preferable to her infidelity, as the former could have been more easily couched in the standard platitudes. As Gaetano D’Elia has noted, Hervey gives in to a ‘tedious temptation to preach’ in language

¹² Dale Kramer, ‘Conrad’s Experiments with Language and Narrative in “The Return”’, *Studies in Short Fiction*, 25:1 (1988), 1-11 (p.7).

which expresses ‘slogans’ rather than fully-formed ideas.¹³ D’Elia allies this to the influence of newspapers and periodicals, noting the wider impact of this on Hervey’s world: Mrs Hervey’s affair is with the editor of the society paper with which her husband has been involved. The ‘unhealthy, fat ass of a journalist’ (*TU* 113) also has a predilection for writing ‘absurd verses’ (*TU* 125). However, the derivative nature of his language, together with a predilection for sermonizing, also suggest that Hervey’s home has become his platform, in a period when his beliefs and resultant sense of personal security were being assailed from all sides. As I have argued in the previous chapter, Conrad’s engagement with the problems of the platform and the power of the spoken word was especially apparent in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, but it is also in evidence in this contemporaneous story.

Since Albert J. Guerard dismissed ‘The Return’ as ‘Conrad’s worst story of any length, and one of the worst ever written by a great novelist’, readings have offered a range of interpretations which acknowledge the story’s complexity, identify Conradian themes that recur in later works, and speculate on its influences.¹⁴ Edward Said, for example, explores Hervey’s psychology and argues that the central focus of the story is a crisis about the shame of social exposure, which takes the protagonist to ‘a new realm of moral suffering’.¹⁵ Elsewhere, Deirdre David, like D’Elia, discusses the nature of Hervey’s speech, arguing that the story expresses the inadequacy of language for an acutely self-conscious protagonist, who is burdened by his own sense of self-hood.¹⁶ In similar

¹³ Gaetano D’Elia, ‘“The Return” and Conrad’s Umbrella’, *Polish Review*, 29:3 (1984), 35-41 (pp.37-9).

¹⁴ Albert J. Guerard, *Conrad the Novelist* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA: 1958), p.96.

¹⁵ Edward W. Said, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p.105.

¹⁶ Deirdre David, ‘Selfhood and Language in “The Return” and “Falk”’, *Conradiana*, 3:2 (1976), 137-47.

terms, Lewis E. Birdseye has argued for Hervey's consciousness as a 'curse'.¹⁷ While emphasizing Hervey's sense of isolation, all these readings overlook the extent to which his is an urban psychology, struggling to make sense of the exterior impressions of the city which flood into his mind, along with those which derive from his personal crisis. Indeed, if a uniting theme may be identified within such readings, it would be related to underlying assumptions about the intrinsic domesticity, interiority even, of a story where speech, thought, and the minutiae of a London drawing-room appear to dominate.

The domestic setting of this story has also led to a general concurrence with Ian Watt's view that it is 'Jamesian'.¹⁸ Conrad wrote this story over the summer of 1897, having met Henry James earlier that year, and read James's newly published *The Spoils of Poynton*. Other readings have considered different literary influences on this story. Yves Hervouet, for example, has argued for Conrad's French 'borrowings', citing similarities to Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* (1885).¹⁹ Peter Keating, Paul Kirschner, and Robert Hampson have all argued for the influence of Ibsen, as I will discuss in a later section. This chapter will argue that Conrad's influences may derive from more popular sources, such as Hall Caine's *The Christian* and other contemporary works of fiction and non-fiction which sought to represent life in the modern city. In the Author's Note (1919) to *Tales of Unrest*, Conrad emphasizes the importance of the impressions in 'The Return':

the story consists for the most part of physical impressions; impressions of sound and sight, railway station, streets, a trotting

¹⁷ Lewis E. Birdseye, 'The Curse of Consciousness: A Study of Conrad's "The 'Return'", *Conradiana*, 9:2 (1977), 171-178.

¹⁸ See Watt, p.203 and Kingsbury, p.32.

¹⁹ These similarities are summarized by Allan H. Simmons and J.H. Stape, in Appendix C, 'Borrowings and Echoes from Maupassant's *Bel-Ami* in *Tales of Unrest*, ed. by Simmons and Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.288-9.

horse, reflections in mirrors and so on rendered as if for their own sake and combined with a sublimated description of a desirable middle class town-residence which somehow manages to produce a sinister effect. (*TU* 7)

This chapter focuses on those impressions, and argues that, through the opposition of silence and noise, Conrad engages with contemporary concerns about the fate of the millennial city at a time of social upheaval. In a milieu dominated by virtues of order and restraint, silence is especially symbolic, and is constantly challenged by the noises which haunt Hervey's ostensibly secure existence.

Silence and order

Hervey returns home to a 'West-End station' via an 'inner circle train' (*TU* 103). In the 1890s, the stations to the west on the Inner Circle line were Sloane Square, South Kensington, Brompton (Gloucester Road), High Street Kensington, Notting Hill Gate and Bayswater.²⁰ Conrad's description of 'Somebody's gardens, a Crescent – a couple of squares' (*TU* 106) is suggestive of the estates built in the Kensington district in the 1840s which were characterized by strikingly geometric and predictable street patterns. As I have noted in the Introduction, these epitomize 'charted' London. Consistent with this, Hervey's walk home follows a set pattern: from the underground he 'turned twice to the left, once to the right, walked along two sides of a square' (*TU* 8).²¹

William Bonney argues that the 'inner circle' has a figurative significance as the centre of economic power to which, as a City

²⁰ There is a map of the underground system in 1890 in Tim Demuth, *The Spread of London's Underground* (London: Capital Transport, 2003), p.9.

²¹ It seems likely that Conrad sought to emphasize the topographical predictability of such districts. Today, a walk following this route from Kensington High Street tube station leads to a square very similar to that occupied by the Herveys, although in this case constructed in the early-1900s.

businessman, Hervey belongs.²² However, Bonney misses the additional symbolism of the underground line, which had a powerful impact on the contemporary popular imagination. Completed in 1884, the Inner Circle had a novelty value as the line that seemingly did not go anywhere: there was ‘no return’ on a journey that simply went round in a circle.²³ Urban myths circulated about disorientated passengers getting stuck on the line.²⁴ While also suggestive of the city’s poor, as I have noted above, the description of the distressed woman running to catch the train may be an allusion to this. Through beginning the story in this way, Conrad also reinforces the geometric and figurative connectivity of the squares and ‘circles’ of Hervey’s existence. As I will explore further in Chapter 3, modern urban life now offered many actual and figurative connections. The extent to which they provided routes through the urban sprawl, or merely new forms of entrapment was, however, questionable, as Hervey comes to intuit.

Steam trains were finally withdrawn in 1905 when the line was electrified but until then passengers had to endure a notoriously unpleasant journey. In a diary entry for October 1900, the American journalist R.D. Blumenfeld describes being ‘nearly suffocated’ on an Inner Circle steam train: the carriages were filled with ‘sulphurous smoke’ and his fellow passengers ‘coughed incessantly’.²⁵ In ‘The Return’, the impressions of the underground train’s ‘discordant grinding racket’, the ‘slamming of carriage doors’ which ‘burst out sharp and spiteful like a fusillade’ and the

²² W. Bonney, ‘Contextualizing and Comprehending Joseph Conrad’s “The Return”’ *Studies in Short Fiction*, 33:1 (1996), 77-90, <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 20 June 2007] (para. 8 of 26).

²³ See Christian Wolmar, *The Subterranean Railway: How the London underground was built and how it changed the city forever* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004), p.92. See also T.C. Barker and Michael Robbins, *A History of London Transport: The Nineteenth Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp.235-37.

²⁴ See W.J. Passingham, *The Romance of London’s Underground* (London: Benjamin Blom, 1972), p.38 and Arthur C. Beavan, *Tube, Train, Tram and Car or Up-to-Date Locomotion* (London: Routledge, 1903), p.91.

²⁵ R.D.Blumenfeld, *R.D.B’s Diary, 1887-1914* (London: Heinemann, 1930), p.114.

‘acid fumes’ (*TU* 103) evoke the unpleasant experience of underground travel. One contemporary commentator notes the deleterious effect on ‘modern nerves’ of that sound of slamming carriage doors.²⁶ Elsewhere, in an account from 1896 which appeared in the *English Illustrated Magazine*, a journalist describes a hellish round trip on the engine of an Inner Circle train. He is assailed by the ‘shrieking of a thousand demons rising over the thunder of wheels’ and evokes a journey into the dark heart beneath London’s surface: ‘Before and beyond was blackness, heavy, dense, impenetrable’.²⁷ The sound of the Victorian underground also symbolized, to use Wolmar’s terms, the ‘ghoulish noise’ of cost-cutting, as the ‘cut and cover’ method created areas of open ground through which the underground trains could be heard.²⁸ The ensuing gaps, surrounded by walls, created echo chambers from which eerie sounds emitted. A retreat from the city’s noise and nastiness might be attempted, therefore, but it was never going to be completely successful.

Kensington’s reputation as just such a quiet retreat and a place of wealth and fashion is likely to have been very familiar to Conrad as he started writing ‘The Return’ in August 1897. His friendship with John Galsworthy, whose family had close associations with the area, and his recent acquaintanceship with Henry James – at this time residing in de Vere’s Gardens – would have enhanced his awareness of the nuances of its social customs. Conrad may have intended his contemporary readership to imagine the Herveys in the specific area known as Brompton-Kensington, which had been extremely fashionable for a fleeting period: lacking the social status of Belgravia or Mayfair, its heyday was already over by the

²⁶ See Beavan, p.59.

²⁷ Fred T. Jane, ‘Round the Underground on an Engine’, *English Illustrated Magazine*, August 1893. Quoted by Wolmar, pp.109-112.

²⁸ See Wolmar, p.2. Between 1891-1897, Conrad had lived in Gillingham Street in close proximity to the Metropolitan District line. By the time he wrote ‘The Return’, he would have been familiar with such sounds.

1890s.²⁹ In James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, which Conrad had read and admired soon after its publication in early 1897, Mrs Gereth describes a fashionably pretentious feature as being 'like the portico of a house in Brompton'.³⁰ This expresses a contemporary perception of an area populated with an acquisitive class of the *nouveau riche* like the Herveys, whose 'pitiless materialism' (*TU* 105) Conrad evokes through the fashionable clutter of their home.

The London square is described by one of its historians in 1907 as an 'essentially English institution'.³¹ Within the squares, the volume of the surrounding din was dimmed, yet the city remained within earshot. This aspect of London's topography clearly interested Conrad; in *The Secret Agent*, 'Chesham Square' in Belgravia functions as an aural oasis in close proximity to noisy thoroughfares like Piccadilly. As London expanded throughout the nineteenth century, the square was increasingly valued as a retreat from modernity and as an expression of *rus in urbe* where London's more rural past might be imagined, if not exactly experienced, amongst the weeds, gravel and railings. Dickens describes such a 'desirable nook' in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), where he locates the Cheeryble's counting house in a quiet square in the heart of the City:

It is so quiet, that you can almost hear the ticking of your own watch when you stop to cool in its refreshing atmosphere. There is a distant hum – of coaches not of insects – but no other sound disturbs the stillness of the square.³²

Similarly, in *Bleak House*, Esther Summerson experiences the 'sudden quietude' of the square in Lincoln's Inn, where the offices of Kenge and

²⁹ See Olsen, p.186.

³⁰ Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton* (London: Penguin, 1963), p.73.

³¹ E. Beresford Chancellor, *The History of the Squares of London: Topographical and Historical* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1907) p.ix.

³² Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.468-69.

Carboy's are located.³³ Such squares survived in central London in and around the Temple and the Inns of Court, as described by Dickens, and also in the East End. By the late nineteenth century, however, the Georgian glory days of the East End squares were a distant memory, with many given over to commerce and multi-occupancy.³⁴ This increased the social cachet of the West End residential square. Unlike the gentry and the famous public figures who once typically inhabited London's Georgian squares, the middle-class City banker of the 1890s was not a 'somebody', but he could aspire to a similar lifestyle.

The presence of 'gardens' in Kensington recalls a district once full of open green spaces. From the perspective of the 1890s, Brompton, for example, had until only recently been regarded as 'semi-rural'.³⁵ London's capitulation to bricks and mortar was, therefore, particularly apparent in such areas. While the street names around them alluded to a greener and generally more illustrious past, the residents were confined by railings and relentlessly standardized street patterns. In the middle of the Herveys' square, the 'groups of tame-looking trees' which 'stood in respectable captivity' (*TU* 107) provide a comic glimpse of the type of peaceful and rural lifestyle to which their class aspired and give an indication of Conrad's understanding, despite being an *émigré*, of the social nuances of such an environment in 1890s' London. Images of the rural idyll keep breaking through in 'The Return', as in, for example, Hervey's memories of his marriage proposal, which are shrouded in 'sumptuous serenity' and 'perfect security' (*TU* 128). These may be understood as a form of psychological antidote to urban life, like the paintings of village and river-

³³ Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 37.

³⁴ See Beresford Chancellor, pp.ix-x.

³⁵ This is reflected in accounts which sought to record the obliteration of London's open spaces. See, for example, Percy Fitzgerald, *London City Suburbs As They Are To-day* (London: Leadenhall Press, 1893), p.68, where it is noted that living in Brompton had once almost equated to living in the country.

side scenes on his walls. Soames Forsyte has similar tastes in *The Man of Property*, collecting paintings which are:

nearly all landscapes with figures in the foreground, a sign of some mysterious revolt against London, its tall houses, its interminable streets, where his life and the lives of his breed and class were passed.³⁶

Through the purchase of a house in a ‘serene region’ (TU 105) of London, the wealthy attempted to achieve their own urban version of rural serenity.

As I have noted earlier, the defining auralty of such squares was their impression of silence. In ‘The Return’, Conrad subverts the security of this silence, while parodying the artistic tastes of the bourgeoisie who resided in such locations. The Herveys’ home is ‘hardly disturbed by the faint noises of a respectable quarter of the town’ (TU 119). This silence could be further attempted inside the home, through heavy carpets, curtains, and wall-paper of the type that adorn the Herveys’ house. It is notable that on his return home, Hervey moves about a silent house, climbing the stairs ‘without footfalls’ (TU 107). The impression Conrad creates is of life itself being extinguished within such an environment. Indeed, the heavy upholstery of the typical Victorian drawing-room could lead to what has been described, in musical terms, as an acoustically ‘dead’ environment.³⁷ Hervey’s musical tastes appear to be suitably subdued, his humming of a ‘popular but refined tune’ (TU 108) typifying the tastes of man whose idea of ‘art’ tends to the sentimental and the bourgeois. The tune Hervey hummed may be imagined as the aural equivalent of his paintings, something from Gilbert and Sullivan perhaps, but most certainly not from the disreputable music-hall. By the 1890s, ‘popular’ meant best-selling in terms of sheet-music sales whereas at the beginning of the century it had

³⁶ Galsworthy, *The Forsyte Saga*, p.61.

³⁷ See Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois*, p.58.

been used to describe music that was well-known or well-regarded.³⁸ Conrad's use of the word 'popular' is, therefore, probably deliberate and intended to further establish Hervey as a materialistic man who is more easily influenced by fashion than by 'art'.

The type of 'row' house occupied by the Herveys gave a visual expression, like the squares and crescents, of the associated virtues of predictability, order and control. Such houses were also a feature of aspirant working- and lower-middle class streets and, as Stefan Muthesius has discussed, the architectural unity of these suggested 'special social achievement on the part of those who planned and built it and those who bought or rented it'.³⁹ The 'crowd' of these that lined the streets of wealthy areas thereby had an especial social cachet, reinforced by the suggestion of protection from a chaotic and dangerous city. Conrad foregrounds the significance of protection in the opening of the second chapter of *The Secret Agent*, in the episode where Verloc walks to the Russian Embassy in Belgravia.⁴⁰ As Verloc passes through the wealthy environs of Hyde Park, he surveys the scene before him:

All these people had to be protected. Protection is the first necessity of opulence and luxury. They had to be protected; and their horses, carriages, houses, servants had to be protected and the source of their wealth had to be protected in the heart of the city and the heart of the country; the whole social order favourable to their hygienic idleness had to be protected against the shallow enviousness of unhygienic labour. (15-16)

Such terms recall the significance of work and the 'worker' in the city, whilst echoing the idea expressed by Hervey in 'The Return' that there is a latent threat from the 'envious', as I will discuss further below.

³⁸ Ibid., p.208.

³⁹ Stefan Muthesius, *The English Terraced House* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), p.11.

⁴⁰ As Hampson has argued, the economic gulf between London's rich and poor becomes especially apparent in this chapter (*Conrad's Secrets*, p.73).

The notion of protection is also present in this story, but in an abstracted form, where it is expressed through the auralty of the bolts, locks and keys of the Herveys' home. The recognition that 'Nothing could be foreseen, foretold, guarded against' (*TU* 133) is shocking to Hervey and he takes temporary comfort from the sounds of his home being locked up against the city, clinging to the scant hope that the scandal of his wife's infidelity might be contained within his four walls:

A bolt was shot – then another. They were locking up – shutting out his desire and his deception from the indignant criticism of a world full of noble gifts for those who proclaim themselves without stain and without reproach. He was safe; [...] A lock snapped, a short chain rattled Nobody shall know. (*TU* 147-148)

A quiet life behind closed, and preferably locked, doors was a defining feature of 'respectable' as opposed to 'horrible' Victorian London. In *How the Poor Live and Horrible London* (1889), George Sims describes the open doors and windows which feature in the city's poorest districts, symbolizing the type of lifestyle which was lived out on the streets; for a middle-class observer, the mere glimpse of blinds or curtains was interpreted as an attempt at social respectability.⁴¹ Such a detail is present in *The Secret Agent*, where the Verlocs' venetian blinds symbolize some measure of respectability and insularity from the streets outside. As he opens the venetian blind, Verloc is faced with the 'enormity' of London, suggested by the 'inhospitable accumulation of bricks, slates and stones' (48). Verloc has had to face the 'out of doors' (48), an engagement with the wider city which was presaged by his meeting with Vladimir, a vision of whom appears at the window. Verloc knows he will have to undertake an act of destructive violence to stir up the city and thus make it fully aware of the anarchist threat in its midst. Earlier, Verloc has 'shut the bolt' (44) on Ossipon *et al.*, as they left his home. Now, as the blind goes

⁴¹ George R. Sims, *How the Poor Live and Horrible London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), p.10.

down with a 'great rattle' (48) the sanctity of his home has been invaded by the 'out of doors', in the guise of the knowledge of what is to come.

There is a similar engagement with the 'out of doors' in 'The Return', where Conrad describes the 'innumerable houses with closed doors and curtained windows' which signify a 'correct silence' (*TU* 116). As Bailey has noted, silence does not just represent an 'absence of sounds, but rather an act'.⁴² In this case, the silence of the middle-class houses asserts a respectability and a prevailing culture of reserved bourgeois 'Englishness', which was stereotypically demonstrated by a predilection for being indoors. In 1877, an architect had observed that even a balcony was a redundant feature: 'Englishmen [in contrast to Parisians] do not desire to get out, or even look out of the windows; balconies are useless'.⁴³ Conrad characterizes this national trait through Hervey, who, like Galsworthy's Soames Forsyte, has a horror of emotional behaviour. Having read his wife's letter, Hervey loses his characteristic reserve and rushes to the window 'with the unreflecting precipitation of a man anxious to raise an alarm of fire or murder' (*TU* 109). Like a fire or a murder, the letter left by Mrs Hervey is the unexpected event which forces her husband into his own encounter with the 'out of doors', as represented, in this instance, by Hervey's impression that his respectably quiet house has been invaded by the morality of the city at large.

Silence was also associative of a patriarchal order which determined that, as I have noted earlier, women had been traditionally expected to keep quiet about their own ambitions outside the home. Mrs Hervey's feminine reserve was part of her charm for Hervey, who had failed to notice that this silence was an act not of submission, but of unhappiness:

⁴² See Bailey, p.199.

⁴³ William H. White, 'Middle-Class Homes in Paris and Central London', Sessional Papers of the Royal Institute of British Architects, 1877-78, pp.21-65. Quoted by Muthesius, p.47.

There was the habit – the habit of her person, of her smile, of her gestures, of her voice, of her silence. [...] All that had been so much his property, so intimately and specially his. (TU 115)

Conrad's emphasis on such a claustrophobic domestic interior, with the underlying theme of marital conflict (from which one of the couple eventually flees) has led to critical comparisons with Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. First performed in 1889, *A Doll's House* was revived in London in May 1897, when Conrad was at work on 'The Return'. Peter Keating argues for literary allusions to Ibsen's play, notably through the symbolism of Hervey slamming the door at the end of the story, which replicates Nora's departure in *A Doll's House*.⁴⁴ In particular, Keating notes that there is a similarity between the words which Conrad uses in 'The Return' to describe this episode – 'below', 'heavily', 'vibrated' – to those of an 1890 translation by William Archer.⁴⁵ Keating argues that Conrad alludes to the feminism of Ibsen's play by finishing 'The Return' with a role reversal, whereby it is the man who achieves independence by leaving the family home.

However, Hervey's position is arguably rather more ambiguous and complex than that of Ibsen's Nora. Firstly, there is the status of property and the importance of the home as a protective shell for the type of aspirant middle-class Englishman he epitomizes. While we may not exactly imagine Hervey homeless as a result of his departure, he has certainly slammed the door on his material security, which may now implode in a 'clap of thunder' (TU 152). Conrad's appreciation of the significance of property ownership for the English middle and upper-classes is apparent from his 1906 essay 'John Galsworthy: an

⁴⁴ Paul Keating, 'Conrad's *Doll's House*', in *Papers on Language and Literature Presented to Alvar Ellegård and Erik Frykman*, ed. by Sven Bäckman and Göran Kjellmer (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1983), pp.221-31.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.224.

Appreciation'. There he discusses Galsworthy's *Man of Property* and his treatment of the Forsytes for whom:

Life as a whole has come to be perceptible to them exclusively in terms of property. Preservation, acquisition – acquisition, preservation. Their laws, their morality, their art and their science appear to them, justifiably enough, consecrated to that double and unique end. It is the formula of their virtue. (*LE* 97)

This essay post-dates 'The Return'. However, by the time Conrad wrote this story, he had been friends with Galsworthy for four years and would have become familiar with this aspect of English culture. He would also, as I have argued in Chapter 1, been aware of some of the nuances surrounding the notion of English 'rights' in the wake of the 1884 Reform Act. It is significant that the word 'right' recurs at the end of 'The Return', this time as expressed by Mrs Hervey, as 'a right – a right – to – to – myself' (*TU* 151). Hervey seemingly wishes her to simply give way and to show a 'gift' for a form of womanly double deceit. This is an act of 'tacit complicity' (*TU* 150) by which the renouncement of her affair is not enough; she must engage with a lie by voicing her love for Hervey and thus allow herself to be re-possessioned. He, in turn, will offer forgiveness, but only through duty, not because it is genuinely felt.

The sound of Mrs Hervey's laugh in response to Hervey's assertions about duty is arguably much more significant than that of the slamming door, as it is this sound which breaks through the unreal and life denying silence which surrounds them. Hervey 'heard a laugh and it not only interrupted his words but also destroyed the peace of his self-absorption with the vile pain of a reality intruding upon the beauty of a dream' (*TU* 137). Reality thus breaks the 'silence within and the silence without' (*TU* 137). However, Hervey is a slave to the customs and beliefs of his class and he hears only the sound of female hysteria, 'the horror of those mad

shrieks' (*TU* 138), which are so audibly out of place in a respectable home. Mrs Hervey had returned and was prepared to 'stand' living with a social lie about her affair, but not at the expense of having the right to be true to herself. The house thereby becomes the loci for a collision between Hervey's materialism and his wife's greater emotional complexity. How far Hervey has achieved his own independence is, therefore, open to doubt; he has seemingly shut the door both on material security and the prospect of a more emotionally equitable relationship.

Peter Kirschner has also suggested that Conrad was influenced by Ibsen, noting that Nora and Hervey both experience an 'intolerable psychological insecurity' within their own homes, from which both must flee.⁴⁶ Kirschner argues that Nora's husband and Hervey's wife are 'more thoroughly dependent on society's conceptions of themselves' than their spouses.⁴⁷ Such a reading overlooks Mrs Hervey's independence of spirit and also her questioning of social convention. Her question to Hervey 'What is right?' (*TU* 131) strikes to the very heart of the situation, but her husband is unable to deal with this complexity, dismissing this question as 'utter rot' (*TU* 131). However, Conrad's correspondence does indicate a familiarity with Ibsen's work, as Hampson has identified.⁴⁸ Hampson also argues for Ibsen's influence on Conrad and for 'The Return's' theatricality, noting that its story is structured into three acts like a play and that Hervey takes on the demeanour of an actor in a melodrama.⁴⁹ Descriptions of the rows of 'flimsy' houses (*TU* 131) are certainly suggestive of a stage-set, as are the descriptions of the Herveys'

⁴⁶ Paul Kirschner, 'Conrad, Ibsen, and the Description of Humanity', *Conradiana*, 25: 3 (1993), 178-206 (p.191).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Robert Hampson, 'From Stage to Screen: "The Return", *Victory*, *The Secret Agent* and *Chance*', *Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts*, ed. by K. Baxter and R.J. Hand (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp.59-76.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.60.

house vibrating to the sound of the closing door. But the theatricality of this story arguably has a wider symbolism, deriving from Conrad's impressions of middle-class life amongst these uniform streets, the silence and stolidity of which belie the fact that each door may be opened onto a private drama within.

Hervey starts to mentally re-frame these respectably silent houses into something more dramatic, where the 'anguish and folly' of private lives is played out (*TU* 116). Furthermore, Hervey fears that his own domestic drama may transfer to a larger arena in the form of the divorce court. As Robert Gray has discussed, the Victorian divorce court provided a public stage on which these previously private domestic dramas could be enacted.⁵⁰ The divorce court also offered a legitimate opportunity for the stereotypically emotionally reticent middle-class lady to give vent to her feelings. Hervey fears the scandal of this 'unclean and sinister cavern' (*TU* 113). From his perspective, this would have been an unwelcome stage on which his characteristically reserved wife might find her voice.

For Hervey, the previously reassuring silence of his home and his wife both prove to have been deceptive. Even the silence of the maids, who 'served without noise' (*TU* 142) seems to mask the duplicity of all of womankind. An understanding that this 'wooden unconcern' (*TU* 142) might itself be an act, a dutiful artifice required by their employment, eludes Hervey, although it briefly occurs to him that they might have 'feelings or judgment' (*TU* 142). Hervey has previously believed that the silence of his home and the surrounding streets signified all the values he held dear, as he expresses to Mrs Hervey, '...Duty...Burden...ourselves....Silence' (*TU* 135). The resultant threat to his sense of

⁵⁰ Robert Gray, 'Pulpit and Witness Box: The Case of Hall v. Hall & Richardson', in *Platform Pulpit Rhetoric*, Working Papers for Victorian Studies, Vol.3, ed. by Martin Hewitt (Leeds: Leeds Centre, University of Leeds, 2000), pp.62-73.

security is encapsulated by the surrounding houses which have now undergone a transformation and their ‘grim, impenetrable silence’ (TU 136) has become threatening for Hervey. His fears encompass his wife’s silence, which he had once valued as such a socially appropriate quality: ‘he thought the silence in the room was becoming dangerous, and so excessive as to produce the effect of an intolerable uproar’ (TU 141). As cited above, Conrad’s Author’s Note to this story states his intent to create a ‘sinister effect’ through the impressions. This is largely achieved through his treatment of silence whereby one of London’s most prized commodities, in residential terms, comes to symbolize the shallow materialism of an entire class, who exist in servitude to social custom, behind doors which are ‘as impenetrable to the truth within as the granite of tombstones’ (TU 148).

By the late-1890s, it would appear that the psychological effects of this type of environment were beginning to be recognized. Paradoxically, while the endless spread of squares and crescents offered a quiet retreat from the city, they simultaneously reminded the individual of his own small space within it. An anonymous essay appearing in *Blackwoods* in October 1899 suggests a form of terror by topography whereby the seemingly limitless streets reminded the individual of his mortality:

You walk through squares and streets and ‘gardens’ and ‘terraces’, and they are all the same. Square succeeds square with no individual difference. Consequently, one is afraid, feeling one’s own narrow limits and very finite condition, one’s tendency to change and caprice, one’s development and the end thereof – feeling all this and feeling Bayswater’s immutability and vastness.⁵¹

Lord Jim was being serialized at the same time in *Blackwoods* and Conrad refers to this essay in a letter to William Blackwood, where he

⁵¹ ‘London’, *Blackwoods Magazine*, October 1899, 460-83 (p.474).

describes it as ‘remarkable’ but a ‘very literary thing’ of a type that, for him, has little ‘appeal’ (CL2 213-4). Ironically, however, such a representation of the residential London streets is very similar to Conrad’s own in both ‘The Return’ and *The Secret Agent*. Both works feature descriptions of innumerable houses and streets within which, after a crisis, an individual becomes aware of their own small place in the great scheme of things, and either ends up out on the streets or wandering through them. ‘The Return’ finishes with Hervey’s exit from his home, while, at the end of *The Secret Agent*, we see Ossipon wander aimlessly through ‘Squares, Places, Ovals, Commons’ (224). Hervey’s experience is similar to Ossipon’s: once so adept at ‘annexing’ street after street into a web of social connectivity, he starts to feel powerless in the face of the ‘innumerable dwellings’ which remain ‘shoulder to shoulder’ (TU 122) like a rather obdurate crowd who are impervious to his sense of loneliness and despair. Meanwhile, the home which had once offered status and a sense of permanence seems about to collapse around him.

At the beginning of ‘The Return’, Conrad’s description of the ‘indifferent faces’ (TU 103) of the City businessmen is consistent with the impressions of London’s disinterest in the individual which recur throughout late-Victorian fiction and non-fiction. In his 1905 essay on London, Henry James recalls his feelings of being overwhelmed by a city which is ‘as indifferent as Nature itself to the single life’.⁵² Conrad refers to this impression in the Author’s Note to *The Secret Agent*, where he describes the story’s development, and his impression of the ‘monstrous town’ with a ‘man-made might’ which is seemingly ‘indifferent to heaven’s frowns and smiles’ (6). A fear of urban indifference haunts the Professor in this novel, deriving from the idea that nothing, even the

⁵² Henry James, ‘London’, in *English Hours* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p.4.

explosive device he carries, will stir the vast crowd: ‘the unattackable stolidity of a great multitude was the haunting fear of his sinister loneliness’ (77). As such descriptions suggest, perceptions of London’s immensity led to the sense that the city was hostile to the individual. In addition, there was London’s status as a centre of global commerce, where each individual was seemingly absorbed in his own business. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Engels describes the ‘brutal indifference’ of the crowds on the London streets and the ‘sacrifice’ that has been made ‘to create all the wonders of civilization’.⁵³ Elsewhere, Simmel’s ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ identifies London as a place of ‘intellect’ but not of ‘heart’, a characteristic which is associative of London’s commercial activity and its dependency on predictability, punctuality and exactitude.⁵⁴

In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904), G.K. Chesterton uses similar terms to suggest what life might be like in London in the future.⁵⁵ He creates a city in which ‘democracy is dead’ due to this underlying spirit of indifference, which has a corresponding aural quality of quietude:

In this manner it happened that everything in London was very quiet. That vague and somewhat depressed reliance upon things happening as they have always happened, which is with all Londoners a mood, had become an assumed condition.⁵⁶

For Adam Wayne, this is the ‘horrible silence of modernity’, which he likens to the dominant spirit of the crowd: ‘Something must break this strange indifference, this strange dreamy egoism, this strange loneliness of millions in a crowd’.⁵⁷ This is the type of silence with which Conrad

⁵³ Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Quoted by Benjamin in ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, *Illuminations*, p.163.

⁵⁴ Simmel, ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’, pp.50-1.

⁵⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (London: Capuchin Classics, 2008).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.97.

surrounds Hervey, who both personifies and is haunted by the indifferent spirit of the city which he inhabits. Chesterton describes a city where this torpor is broken, as the quiet streets in and around the Kensington district erupt into medieval-style battles. Chesterton thus expresses a spirit of nostalgia for colourful and noisy past times in reaction to London's grey and subdued modernity. As Joseph McLaughlin has discussed, nostalgia permeates much contemporary writing set in London, in response to the vast swathes of London's grey streets.⁵⁸ McLaughlin gives as an example Conan Doyle's repetition of the word 'commonplace' in *The Sign of Four* to describe the dull area around Baker Street.⁵⁹ This expresses the nature of this dreary topography, from which Sherlock Holmes finds an escape through drugs and his visits to the more exotic quarters of the East End.

Hervey's mental escape into nostalgic recollections of the 'vibrating excitement' (*TU* 128) of his marriage proposal may be located in this context. Hervey's memories evoke 'fabulous tales of enchanted gardens' and 'bewitched knights' (*TU* 128). Stape and Simmons note that here Conrad may allude to Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, or to Wagner's 1882 opera *Parsifal* which features knights, magic gardens and flower maidens.⁶⁰ However, the use of this type of sensual imagery also signified a common reaction to what was perceived as a dull and prosaic existence in the modern city. As I will discuss further in Chapter 4, such impressions recurred in the music-hall, on programmes and in acts which recalled medieval entertainments and the days of 'Merry England'. Such nostalgic medievalism appealed to Londoners needing to escape from

⁵⁸ Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire from Doyle to Eliot* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.56.

⁶⁰ Allan H. Simmons and J.H. Stape, 'Explanatory Notes', 'The Return', in *Tales of Unrest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.307-310 (p.309).

their ‘commonplace’ existence. Hervey’s ‘commonplace refinement’ (TU 104) is thus oxymoronic: he aspires to a position in society which is actually defined by the common places of those endless and seemingly identical streets.

While the West End square offered a taste of a rural past, there was no escape from the city, sense impressions of which intrude throughout the ‘The Return’. The enormous size of the city remains in sight through its innumerable gaslights and trails of smoke, and is still audible through the sound of traffic. As he opens his window, Hervey’s senses are assaulted:

At the rattle of the opened window the world seemed to leap out of the night and confront him – while floating up to his ears there came a sound vast and faint, the deep mutter of something immense and alive. It penetrated him with a feeling of dismay and he gasped silently. (TU 109)

In *Beyond the City* (1894), Doyle describes a similar effect of seeing and hearing London at a distance, in this case, from rather further away in the Norwood area:

From afar, when the breeze came from the north, the dull, low roar of the great City might be heard like the breaking of the tide of life, while along the horizon might be seen the dim curtain of smoke, the grim spray which that tide threw up.⁶¹

The ‘floating’ of Conrad’s description, and the ‘tide’ of Doyle’s, evoke the ceaseless quality of the London ‘sea’ or ‘stream’ of life, the familiar trope which also occurs in Dickens. Shut away just out of earshot in a square or court, the Victorian Londoner could never quite escape the relentless pace of the city. Dickens describes this experience in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where he invites his readership to imagine ‘a sick man in such a place as Saint Martin’s court, listening to the footsteps [...] think of the hum and noise being always present to his senses, and of the stream

⁶¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *Beyond the City* (London: George Newnes, 1894), p.7.

of life that will not stop'.⁶² By the 1890s, when the suburbanization process was well underway, the better-off sought an escape to an approximation of the 'country', only to find, as Doyle suggests, that they ended up still hearing the city at a distance. While the sounds of the city quietened during the night, the perception was of incessant activity, rather like a tide coming in and out. Hervey's 'gasp' in response to the sounds and sights of the city suggests he felt overwhelmed by the rush of incoming impressions. At the end of 'Karain', the narrator experiences the city in similar terms, as a place of 'gasping voices' (*TU* 48) and incessant activity. In a city which was popularly perceived to be somewhat heartless, the individual is left struggling for breath in its presence.

At the end of *Beyond the City*, Doyle suggests that the ostensibly opposing worlds of home and the City can come together: the businessman can find spiritual respite at home, enabling him to live figuratively 'beyond' the values of his work. Hervey fails to do this. The crisis engendered by his wife's flight from their home should have stirred in him feelings which led him to appreciate his wife for her true self, rather than as a commodity. However, he thinks of her only 'as a well-bred girl, as a wife, as a cultured person, as the mistress of a house, as a lady' (*TU* 110). In the carefully controlled 'metallic atmosphere' of his home, Hervey can only deal with the 'facts' of his situation, but not with the words, the sound of which would be too painful:

It was terrible – not the fact but the words; the words; the words charged with the shadowy might of meaning, which seemed to express the inexplicable power to call Fate down on the earth like those strange and appalling words that sometimes are heard in sleep. They vibrated around him in a metallic atmosphere in a space that had the hardness of iron and the resonance of a bell of bronze.

⁶² Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, p.8.

Looking down between the toes of his boots he seemed to listen thoughtfully to the receding wave of sound; to the wave spreading out in a widening circle embracing streets, roofs, church-steeple, fields – and travelling away widening endlessly far, very far, where he could not hear – where he could not imagine anything – where
(*TU* 110)

Iron suggests the modernity of industry and the railways. As I have noted in the Introduction, Conrad draws on this symbolism in *The Mirror of the Sea*, where he describes the ‘iron heart’ of the steamship, and also in ‘Amy Foster’, where iron’s distinctive ‘clang’ expresses the noisy modernity of Berlin. In the passage above, it is notable that the properties of iron are equated to those of bronze; together, these give an impression of modern urban domesticity. At the beginning of ‘The Return’, it is significant that Conrad’s description of the iron railings around the Herveys’ square is soon followed by similar details of materials within their home. We learn, for example, that ‘Brass rods glimmered all up the red carpet’ (*TU* 107), while there is a bronze gaslight and strips of glass on the wardrobe doors. These are unyielding and unechoic surfaces, which through their lack of resonance reinforce the materiality of what is a claustrophobic and oppressive existence.

Hervey’s momentary awareness of his small place in the universe is described by Conrad in scientific terms and the reference to the ‘wave of sound’ is in keeping with an era when processes such as human audition, once mysterious and only understood in subjective terms, could now be quantified by the language of physics.⁶³ While the city itself now seemed without limits, there was no escaping knowledge about the illimitability of a universe which extended far beyond one’s human ‘circle’. That Conrad took an interest in these ideas is suggested by a letter written to Garnett in September 1898, where he describes an evening spent at the

⁶³ As I have noted in the Introduction, Helmholtz’s *Sensations of Tone* was a major work of the 1870s.

Glasgow home of Dr John McIntyre, a friend of Cunninghame Graham. Whilst there, Conrad had seen an x-ray, heard music on a phonograph, and discussed the ‘secret of the universe’ which modern physics had revealed, in the form of ‘various vibrations of waves’, including those of light and sound (CL2 94-96). In Hervey, Conrad had created a modern figure whose lack of insight and understanding nevertheless confined his thoughts to his own sphere, like the Dedlocks’ ‘world of fashion’ described by Dickens in *Bleak House*.⁶⁴ There, the Dedlocks’ society ‘has its limits’, and ‘wrapped up in too much jewellers’ cotton and fine wool’, it cannot ‘hear the rushing of the larger worlds’, because it is a ‘deadened world’.⁶⁵ Conrad uses similar terms to enhance the impression of a lost opportunity for Hervey, whose inability to engage with ideas and feelings beyond the confines of his own restricted universe is expressed through a comic halt, as his thoughts quickly return to the ‘ass’ (TU 110) that his wife has seemingly abandoned him for. Hervey is unable even to decide whether he is ‘heartbroken’, indicating the extent to which he is entrapped by his ‘well ordered mind’ (TU 110), rather as he is confined by the predictability of the surrounding streets.

Noise and chaos

During the 1890s, London’s future was popularly predicted to be a noisy one. The unrest and disorder that followed the 1886 unemployment riots in London had seemed, for a few days at least, to portend a descent into chaos. Reports in *The Times* convey the extent of the fears about mindless pillage and plunder, while also referring to a far greater threat to the very

⁶⁴ Dickens, *Bleak House*, p.17. In *A Personal Record*, Conrad recalls reading this novel ‘innumerable times’ (PR 124).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

structure of society, within which property ownership played such an important role:

Yesterday London from one end to another experienced another sharp spasm of alarm with respect to rioters, and from the heart of the City to the far off suburbs preparations were made to meet bands of ruffians stated to be on the march. That the lawless of the immense population of London should be awakened to their opportunities of plunder was to be expected after the experience of Monday, when the richest part of London was left entirely at their mercy. The tale of Monday's unchecked and uncontrolled march of plunder and destruction, under the openly-preached doctrine of revolutionary social democracy, was carried into every slum of the metropolis, and every ruffian had taken to heart the doctrines preached by Hyndman and his associates – that the 'have nots' were many while the 'haves' were few, and that a show of revolution would cause property to change hands.⁶⁶

Conrad's representation of Hervey's fears of personal and domestic disarray may be usefully allied to wider concerns about imminent social breakdown. Hervey fears 'disorder', which is 'suggestive of trouble' (*TU* 116). Any scandal suggestive of an uncontrolled personal life will affect Hervey's social standing, leaving him prey to the 'weak' and the 'fools and the envious', as he warns his wife, in a 'tone' which is uncharacteristically 'ferocious' (*TU* 137). As Mrs Hervey gives in to her own emotions, her husband loses control and begins to behave like a disorderly man of the crowd: 'He shouted "Enough of this!" like men shout in the tumult of a riot' (*TU* 138). The focalised narration suggests that this is Hervey's own perception of behaviour which is associative of an unruly mob and therefore out of place in his respectable home.

Conrad's description of the Herveys' square as an 'artificial abyss' (*TU* 118) alludes to the acoustic properties of such a location, while using a term which would have had an additional symbolism for his

⁶⁶ 'The Riots in London', *The Times*, 11 February 1886, p.6.

contemporary readership. As Booth's maps of poverty indicate, pockets of 'vicious' poverty were perilously close to London's more well-to-do areas. The word 'abyss' recalls the spectre of a vertiginous descent into poverty and moral degradation which haunted late-Victorian Londoners and which had been chronicled in works such as William Booth's *In Darkest Poverty and the Way Out* (1890). The word also suggests entrapment, an impression which was reinforced by the nature of London's topographics. London's 'unsavoury courts' (13) as Conrad terms these in *The Secret Agent*, were the noisy, working-class, counterpart of the quiet squares. These were also separate acoustic worlds, hellish noise-traps within which the inhabitants could feel just as enclosed but with less hope of an exit into a better life. In a description suggestive of the notorious Seven Dials area, Oscar Wilde evokes these 'gloomy courts' in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), with their sounds of 'hoarse voices', 'cursing', 'chattering', and 'shrieks and oaths'.⁶⁷

Even wealthy districts like Kensington had their own versions of the 'abyss' in the neighbourhood. One account from 1897 identifies it as a place of social contrast: 'the richest district in Europe', yet with 8 per cent of its population living in one-room tenements.⁶⁸ In such districts, the privacy of such squares had, by now, been successfully challenged, and rights 'in' the city increasingly encompassed rights 'to' it, in terms of access to open spaces. As Mark Girouard notes, many wealthy London squares had once been gated and locked until, in the 1890s, Parliament had given the London County Council the power to remove the gates, due to complaints from cab-drivers about gaining access.⁶⁹ Girouard also

⁶⁷ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 1994), pp.103-4.

⁶⁸ See Sherwell, p.8. See also Booth, who notes the 'social instability' of districts like Brompton and Belgravia, where some well-to-do streets were 'suffering decay' and the residents were forced to keep up a 'pretence' of wealth: *Life and Labour*, Third Series: Religious Influences 3 (1902), pp.108-9.

⁶⁹ Mark Girouard, *The English Town: A History of Urban Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), p.36.

notes that the idea of opening up London's squares and churchyards to the poor was being proposed in social commentaries such as Mearns's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*.⁷⁰ The extent to which this actually happened is hard to quantify: an account from 1907 notes that the 'fashionable Squares' are being 'sedulously guarded against the intrusion of outsiders', but that in August the 'better-disposed owners fling open the gates'.⁷¹ This may refer just to the garden areas within the squares themselves. However, for those of Hervey's class, there was clearly a perceived threat from this form of space invasion. Alien noises, like the voices of the cab-drivers in Hervey's square, would now have a wider significance: 'From the cab-stand in the square came distinct hoarse voices and a jeering laugh which sounded ominously harsh and cruel. It sounded threatening' (*TU* 109). As Hampson has argued, these sounds introduce an 'otherness' into the quiet square.⁷²

Alongside the fears of social revolution were the wider concerns about the morality of the imperial city and the oft-associated ideas that the century would end in some form of apocalyptic disaster. As Karl Beckson discusses, some of these fears had been fuelled by works such as Nordau's *Degeneration* (1883) and Kelvin's theories about entropy and the cooling of the sun.⁷³ The idea that London itself was heading for a 'fall' as a punishment for its sins was encouraged by the Evangelist preachers of the era, who were enjoying, as I have noted in Chapter 1, a revival in popularity. Their sermons drew on biblical tropes of apocalyptic hell-fire and all-consuming floods in their predictions of the city's demise. In his diary for 1889, the publisher Grant Richards records

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp.46-7.

⁷¹ George W.E. Russell, *Seeing and Hearing* (London: E. Grant Richards, 1907), p.121.

⁷² Hampson, "Topographical Mysteries", p.164. Booth observes how the drivers had their favourite districts and cab-stands; see *Life and Labour*, Second Series: Industry, p.295.

⁷³ Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), pp.xi-xvi.

listening to the Reverend Michael Paget Baxter (editor of the *Christian Herald*) threatening the world's end in 1901, before which, in 1896, 144,000 Christians would have been transported to heaven.⁷⁴ The perception of London as an inherently immoral city had, of course, gained especial currency through revelations about the louche behaviour of some sections of its 'society', the class to which Hervey aspires, and who believed that morality was on their 'side' (*TU* 120). Oscar Wilde's behaviour, widely reported during his 1895 trial, had especially seemed to exemplify not only the moral degeneracy of his age, but the manner in which one class exploited another. Similarly, the famous campaigns by Mrs Ormiston Chant to close 'The Empire' music-hall in Leicester Square (revealed as a front for prostitution), brought to attention the extent to which London's public persona of respectability was something of a sham.

In Hampson's terms, the city had its 'secret life', as is exemplified in *The Secret Agent* by Verloc's shop, a front for the sale of pornography and for anarchism.⁷⁵ This secret city is also in evidence in 'The Return', only in a more abstracted form as an intrusion into Hervey's home, which has, from his perspective, been brought about by the infidelity of his wife. Mrs Hervey's characteristic reserve is revealed to have been duplicitous. When she returns home, Hervey perceives in her appearance impressions of actual moral destitution (conflated with poverty) and its reified version on the music-hall stage. Her hat 'indecorously tilted' is suggestive of the appearance of a Marie Lloyd-type performer, while the 'soaked veil' like a 'sordid rag' (*TU* 138) is a further image of poverty and destitution. Mrs Hervey's immorality brings the abyss closer for her husband as he imagines that the once 'prudent peace' of his home and those surrounding

⁷⁴ Grant Richards, *Memories of a Misspent Youth* (London: Heinemann, 1932), p.112.

⁷⁵ Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets*, p.104.

it might now signify a ‘den of coiners’ or a ‘house of ill fame’ within (*TU* 150). It is significant that Mrs Hervey, like her husband and Verloc, has had an encounter with the ‘out of doors’, which is made explicit by Conrad through the description of her muddy boots and skirt. She looks as if she has been ‘street walking’, in an age which, as Judith Walkowitz discusses, prostitution had been revealed to be a feature of the West End as much as the East.⁷⁶

Interesting comparisons can be made in this context between ‘The Return’ and Hall Caine’s *The Christian*, which was published in August 1897, when Conrad was at work on his own metropolitan story. Caine’s novel tackles the question of London’s immorality in typically melodramatic fashion. It tells the story of ‘Father Storm’ who comes to London from the Isle of Man (Caine’s home) and encounters a subterranean hell of prostitution, baby farming and gambling dens. Storm begins to preach moral warnings about London’s demise through a biblical-style flood, in terms which conflate Nordau’s theories with biblical ideas about divine punishment:

God was about to punish London for its sins. The dishonour lay at its door of being the wickedest city in the world. Side by side with the developments of mechanical science, lifting men to the power of angels, there was a moral degeneration degrading them to the level of beasts.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, Storm’s childhood friend Glory Quayle has found a route into London society through success as a music-hall artiste. Glory achieves some measure of fame through the theatre and music-hall. Unlike the more dutiful Mrs Hervey, Glory rejects the type of social philanthropy practised by Storm but she soon discovers that the modern

⁷⁶ See Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

⁷⁷ Hall Caine, *The Christian* (London: Heinemann, 1897), p.359.

city has two sides, and that for working-class girls fame in the music-halls had its price, which included sexual exploitation by the ostensibly respectable men amongst their wealthy audience. Storm decides Glory must be ‘saved’ from this immoral life and, in scenes which recall Hervey’s sermonizing, attempts to convert her to religion.

Caine (a Christian Scientist) was a vocal advocate for social reform, whose melodramatic prose style reflected his other incarnation as a popular dramatist.⁷⁸ *The Christian* gained a lot of column space in the press and the differing reactions to this novel are interesting for what they reveal about contemporary attitudes towards the city and Caine himself. As I have already noted at the end of Chapter 1, the literary establishment mocked Caine’s melodramatic and preachy style of writing. Elsewhere, populist journals like *The World* praised Caine’s story as an exposé of a morally sordid city, deciding that ‘the author of *The Christian* lifts the veil that hides the moral and spiritual truths and terrors of the lives of women in the great city’.⁷⁹ In contrast, publications such as *The London Handbook* dismissed Caine’s novel as a work of social agitation. Seeking in Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee year to promote a touristic view of the city, they take issue with the novel’s treatment of sexuality and with its socialist message, as a reference to two sites of social protest suggests:

In *The Christian*, Mr Hall Caine has given us a weak study of certain primitive emotions: it seems as if all the wealth and might of London are built on the bones and faces of the poor, an insecure foundation and smacking of Tower Hill and Trafalgar Square.⁸⁰

Elsewhere, the social campaigner W.T. Stead found the novel too pessimistic, while lauding Caine as ‘not merely a vivid and realistic

⁷⁸ See Mary Hammond, ‘Hall Caine and the Melodrama on Page, Stage and Screen’, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 37:1 (2004), 39-57.

⁷⁹ ‘Mr Hall Caine’s “Christian”’, *The World*, 25 August 1897, p.12.

⁸⁰ W.L. Wilson, ‘Literature, Art, and Journalism’, *The London Handbook*, June 1897 – May 1898 (London: Grosvenor Press, 1897), p.72.

painter of contemporary life and manners but a preacher of righteousness and of justice', he concludes that *The Christian* was a 'threnody of despair'.⁸¹

Given the amount of press coverage received by *The Christian*, it seems highly likely that Conrad read it, most probably out of a curiosity driven by his interest in what made works 'popular'. In 1898, he wrote to Aniela Zagórska that 'Caine is a kind of male Marie Corelli, like Grant Allen, neither of these writers belong to literature' (CL2 137). While he does not name the title, Conrad's comments to Zagórska about 'that book' having earned its writer 'more than 60 thousand roubles' is highly suggestive of *The Christian*, which was a huge success for Heinemann, Conrad's own publisher. As I have noted in Chapter 1, Conrad and Ford satirized Caine in *The Inheritors* as a modern 'celebrity' author, a reputation which is apparent from an article in *The World*, entitled 'Celebrities at Home' and describing the crowds arriving in charabancs at Greeba Castle (Caine's home on the Isle of Man) to 'feast their eyes on the spectacle of a real live literary man'.⁸² While it might seem unlikely that Conrad would draw inspiration from the work of a writer he so heartily disliked, he would nevertheless have found in *The Christian* a lurid exegesis of some contemporary urban concerns. In 'The Return' Conrad arguably presents an abstracted version of the city which Caine damns in purple prose. There are many similarities between the representation of London in *The Christian* and 'The Return', despite the vast gulf between the aesthetics and ideals of the two writers.

⁸¹ W.T. Stead, 'The Book of the Month', *Review of Reviews*, August 1897, p.299.

⁸² 'Celebrities at Home', *The World*, 11 August 1897, p.8.

Firstly, both works engage with the question of the status of women, a concern of Caine's, who was also interested in the role of Christian morality in a period of increasing secularization.⁸³ Caine had created through Father Storm an unsympathetically self-righteous male protagonist who regards himself as the 'messenger of God's judgement' and, like Hervey, attempts to assert his authority by sermonizing about morality to an independent woman whom he perceives to be wayward.⁸⁴ In both *The Christian* and 'The Return', the central female characters are more sympathetically treated than their male counterparts. As I have argued above, Mrs Hervey is characterized as having more emotional depth than her husband, while Storm's 'Glory' has negotiated an independent life in the city, regardless of all the potential dangers that this entails.

As its title suggests, there is much religious imagery in *The Christian*, as there is in 'The Return', where, as John Lester has noted, it is 'more explicit and more sustained' than is usual in Conrad's work.⁸⁵ Overcome by his own sense of moral superiority, for example, Hervey feels like a 'high priest' in a 'temple' (*TU* 130) and addresses his wife in a voice which 'rose and fell pompously in a strange chant' (*TU* 131). As Lester suggests, such imagery works to suggest the extent to which social custom has become like a religion for Hervey. This seems to have been Conrad's intention: in October 1897, he wrote to Garnett of wanting to 'give out the gospel of the beastly bourgeois' (*CL1* 393) in this story. However, through using such religious terms, Conrad may also allude to the religious fanaticism of the period (as personified by Storm) and to the conventional, although increasingly challenged, status of women as the

⁸³ See David C. MacWilliams, 'The Novelistic Melodramas of Hall Caine: Seventy Years On', *English Literature in Transition (1890-1920)*, 45:4 (2002), 426-439.

⁸⁴ Caine, *The Christian*, p.402.

⁸⁵ John Lester, *Conrad and Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p.151.

listeners. Taking into account the popularity of speakers with a spiritual, moral, or political message, as I have explored in Chapter 1, there is much in Hervey's 'stealthy frenzy of belief' (*TU* 131) which suggests that Conrad may have been parodying this aspect of contemporary popular culture. Conrad's dislike of Caine, who both chronicled and participated in such a culture, may have informed the terms of 'The Return', where Hervey seemingly personifies this form of fervent but vacuous proselytizing.

In both stories, the home becomes the site for a confrontation between an isolated individual (Storm / Hervey) and the morality of the city around them, as symbolized by the behaviour of a woman (Glory / Mrs Hervey). It is particularly notable how London exerts its presence through sound impressions in these episodes and that these work to foreground the individual's sensitivity to the city around them. In *The Christian*, as Storm awaits Glory's return to her home, his senses become heightened:

Suddenly he was aware of the other sounds outside. There was a rumble of wheels and the rattle of a hansom....There was the noise of a curb-chain ... All his senses seemed to have gone into his ears.⁸⁶

Everyday sounds take on a heightened significance for Storm: 'After a moment there was the sound of a key in the lock of the door below; the rustle of a woman's dress coming up the stairs ...'⁸⁷ When Hervey hears his wife return to the home, he is similarly sensitive to sounds: the door closes like a 'clap of thunder', the 'footsteps stopped outside the door', the door's handle 'rattled lightly' (*TU* 117). Hervey had earlier recalled the distinctive sound of 'her footsteps, the rustle of her dress' (*TU* 115). Like Storm's, Hervey's hearing has become 'preternaturally sharp' (*TU*

⁸⁶ Caine, *The Christian*, p.400.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

118) in response to a crisis, in a way which suggests the auditory experience of ‘listening in readiness’, to recall Truax’s term, with all the sense of detachment and potential anxiety that this entails. Storm and Hervey both undergo a personal / spiritual crisis which manifests itself in auditory terms and they both hear the city as a background, the experience which Ford describes in *The Soul of London*.

The Christian and ‘The Return’ also both include impressions of an impending natural disaster, which are explicitly described by Caine and alluded to by Conrad. While Caine sought to make vivid the biblical terms of earthquakes and storms, Conrad’s auditory impressions suggest a wider engagement with ideas about the powers of nature and the elements. As Bertrand Russell recalls, having met him in 1913, Conrad was interested in the idea of the ‘individual human soul faced with the indifference of nature’.⁸⁸ As the above-cited observations made by Henry James in ‘London’ reflect, this was also to be experienced in the city, which seemed as indifferent as the natural world to the fate of the individual.

Other stories which are contemporaneous with ‘The Return’ and *The Christian* engage with similar imagery drawn from natural disasters, which serve to foreground ideas about human vulnerability at a time of declining religious faith. Notable amongst these is Stephen Crane’s story ‘The Open Boat’ (1897), in which the ‘indifference’ of the natural elements plays a key role.⁸⁹ Crane based this story on his personal experience of being shipwrecked off the Florida coast in 1897. Assailed by a storm, the narrator realizes that the sea is ‘indifferent, flatly indifferent’ to his plight, and that there is no God, the ‘guiding pilot’, to

⁸⁸ See Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.217.

⁸⁹ Stephen Crane, ‘The Open Boat’, in *Stephen Crane: An Omnibus*, ed. by Robert Wooster Stallman (New York: Knopf, 1982).

steer him safely home.⁹⁰ Conrad does not appear to have read this story until after ‘The Return’'s completion. However, in a letter to Crane in December 1897, Conrad comments that ‘the boat thing is immensely interesting’ (*CL* 415). In ‘The Return’, he had created a similar dilemma only in an urban setting: in the face of his crisis, Hervey, like the narrator of ‘The Open Boat’, could find no ‘moral solace’ (*TU* 110) in his situation.

As George P. Landow's study of crisis iconology explores, the idea of the impending natural disaster was a popular nineteenth-century trope which may have derived from the continuing impact on the literary imagination of the re-discovery of the ruins of Pompeii.⁹¹ Landow notes the mid-century popularity of paintings depicting the collapse of Pompeii, and of novels such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which contain powerful visual and aural impressions of the city's inhabitants being submerged by lava, along with all the detritus of urban life.⁹² It is well-known that Conrad was familiar with Lytton's work, as the description of Singleton reading *Pelham* in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* suggests. Whether or not Conrad had read *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the symbolism of urban civilization and material excess being crushed by an elemental force would have been equally appropriate for a tale of modern London, in which, as Hervey epitomizes, property ownership and other forms of material possession appear to have been elevated to a form of religion. Conrad would later make a specific reference to Pompeii at the beginning of ‘Il Conde’ (1908), where the narrator describes its artistic legacy at the National Museum of Naples:

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.443.

⁹¹ George P. Landow, *Images of Crisis: Literary Iconology, 1750 to the Present* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), p.113.

⁹² As Francis D. Klingender discusses, apocalyptic scenes also featured in the work of painters like John Martin (1789-1854), as an aesthetic response to the upheaval of industrialization. See *Art and the Industrial Revolution*, ed. and revised by Arthur Elton (London: Paladin, 1968), p.105.

‘that marvellous legacy of antique art whose delicate perfection has been preserved for us by the catastrophic fury of a volcano’ (*SoS* 269). H.G. Wells also mentions Pompeii in *The War of the Worlds*, where the narrator surveys the destruction and observes ‘it made me think of what I had read of the destruction of Pompeii’.⁹³ In this novel, Wells also includes a doom-mongering curate, who regards the Martian invasion as a type of divine punishment for the world’s sins, asserting that this must be the ‘beginning of the end’.⁹⁴

In describing Hervey’s feelings of insecurity, Conrad draws on the imagery of the volcano and earthquake. Hervey’s ‘moral landmarks’, so foolishly grounded in material possessions and convention, begin to subside:

The tumult of his thoughts ended in a sluggish flow of reflection such as after the outburst of a volcano the almost imperceptible progress of a stream of lava creeping languidly over a convulsed land and pitilessly obliterating any landmark left by the shock of the earthquake.

(*TU* 116)

In *Degeneration*, Nordau uses the imagery of the volcano to describe the life flow and the human ability (possessed by all except degenerates, hysterics and neurasthenics) to change and adapt: human life, he asserts, ‘resembles a vast torrent of lava, which rushes, broad and deep, from the crater of a volcano in constant activity’.⁹⁵ It is possible that Nordau’s imagery had influenced Conrad, as he had created in Hervey an individual who, despite the ‘tumult’ of his thinking, could not change or adapt his ideas. There is the further irony that Hervey fears the moral degeneration about which Nordau had warned: Mrs Hervey has been led

⁹³ H.G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.116. This novel first appeared in a serialized version in *Pearson’s Magazine*, between April and December 1897, where Conrad may have read it.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.71.

⁹⁵ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p.540. As Hampson notes in *Conrad’s Secrets*, p.13, Conrad was familiar with Nordau’s work.

astray by one of the poetry-writing ‘artist chaps’ (*TU* 106) in their circle and Hervey is haunted, as I have noted in the previous section, by the spectre of the ‘weak’. However, Conrad seems to be using the descriptions of earthquakes and volcanoes more broadly to suggest the perils of life: interestingly, Russell had come away with the impression that Conrad thought of ‘civilized and morally tolerable human life as a dangerous walk on a thin crust of barely cooked lava’.⁹⁶

Conrad’s impressions of volcanoes, earthquakes, and hurricanes arguably have a further significance in the urban context of ‘The Return’, where the noise in Hervey’s thoughts is of an elemental (and thus uncontrollable) threat to his well-ordered and predictable environment, and specifically to the sanctity of his property. Hervey has ‘the vision of everything he had thought indestructible and safe in this world crashing down about him like solid walls do before the fierce breath of a hurricane’ (*TU* 112). Hervey’s home has become the loci of an intangible menace and he is assailed by alien sounds which threaten to obliterate the very content of this urbane and civilized mind:

he was stunned by a noise meaningless and violent, like the clash of gongs or the beating of drums; a great aimless uproar that, in a manner, prevented him from hearing himself think and made his mind an absolute blank. (*TU* 108-109)

Through such impressions, Conrad foregrounds the vulnerability of a modern and carefully-constructed environment in which pretension reigns and appearance has been accorded too much importance.

The eruption of Krakatoa in August 1883 had provided a particular reminder of the powers and uncertainties of nature. In *Degeneration*, Nordau allies this event to the ‘Dusk of the Nations’ and the idea of a

⁹⁶ Russell, *Autobiography*, p.216.

‘mysterious dimness in which all certainty is destroyed’.⁹⁷ As John M. Picker has noted, the sounds were heard 3, 000 miles away and had impacted on the popular imagination as the loudest ever documented.⁹⁸ Conrad was in Germany at this time, but had travelled in the Far East during the previous year, so this event may have been of particular interest.⁹⁹ The auditory and visual effects of the explosion were also widely discussed in the press. The explosion had caused wonder at the power of ‘Dame Nature’, as a report in *The Times* notes, and also at how an elemental phenomenon on one side of the planet might impact on the other: later that year, it was suggested that the brightly coloured sunrises and sunsets in London were, for example, a result of the exploding volcano.¹⁰⁰

The noises of ‘The Return’ suggest such elemental threats and the resultant urban insecurities. Much critical attention has been given to the conflict between Hervey and his wife, but the perceived battle between nature and civilization (as London epitomizes) should not be underestimated. Elsewhere in contemporary fiction there are allusions to this opposition. In Conan Doyle’s ‘The Five Orange Pips’ (1892), for example, we see the civilized (‘hand-made’) city being battered by a gale, as Watson narrates:

All day the wind had screamed and the rain had beaten against the windows, so that even here in the heart of great, hand-made London we were forced to raise our minds for the instant from the routine of life, and to recognise the presence of those great elemental forces which shriek at mankind through the bars of his civilization, like untamed beasts in a cage.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Nordau, *Degeneration*, p.6.

⁹⁸ John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.4.

⁹⁹ See Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, pp.43-44.

¹⁰⁰ J. Norman Lock, ‘The Recent Sunrises and Sunsets’, *The Times*, 8 December, 1883, p.10.

¹⁰¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, ‘The Five Orange Pips’, in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), pp.175-200 (p.175).

An earlier work, *After London* (1886) by Richard Jefferies, had taken ideas about the mighty city's vulnerability as its focus: this 'marvellous city, of which such legends are related, was after all only of brick'.¹⁰² In an earlier draft of this novel, Jefferies had described how 'soft noiseless snow' had devastated the city and destroyed all its communication systems – with that, of course, came the disabling of the city's trading activities.¹⁰³ The ensuing famine then leads to the type of scenes which would later come to haunt the prose of journalists describing the 1886 riots:

The East rose and threw itself *en masse* upon the West. The fashionable quarters were invaded by an army of ravaging wretches who had climbed over the mounds of frozen snow, and in a moment the houses were swept clean of everything eatable.¹⁰⁴

The presumed immutability of London's material expanse, together with the city's carefully delineated social topographics, are thereby revealed as a chimera, which provides little protection in the face of an elemental threat.

By the late-1890s, London was an increasingly connected city: by transport, by technology, by newsprint, and perhaps most obviously at street level, by the wide new thoroughfares which offered a safer, clearer, route across its great expanse. The idea that one single cataclysmic event might sweep all this away was one which held an especial threat, in a city increasingly reliant on these connections, not just for everyday life but for maintaining its trading activities across the globe. Such imagery is especially apparent in Wells's *The War of the Worlds* where it is notable that Wells, like Chesterton, chooses to utilise a specific district of London in a novel about chaos and destruction. For a contemporary readership,

¹⁰² Richard Jefferies, *After London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.16.

¹⁰³ Jefferies, 'The Great Snow', Appendix to *After London*, p.248.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.246.

the noise of a wailing Martian on the deserted streets of Kensington would have had an especial resonance. This was the epitome of modern, silent (and, by association) civilized, London, where the menace of something unexpected and uncontrollable would have been especially audible to the popular imagination:

It was near South Kensington that I first heard the howling. It crept almost imperceptibly upon my senses. It was a sobbing alternation of two notes, 'Ulla, ulla, ulla, ulla,' keeping on perpetually. [...] it grew in volume, and houses and buildings seemed to deaden and cut it off again. It came in a full tide down Exhibition Road. I stopped, staring towards Kensington Gardens, wondering at this strange, remote wailing. It was as if that mighty desert of houses had found a voice for its fear and solitude.¹⁰⁵

The Martians have been busily 'hamstringing mankind', by destroying the railways and the telegraph network.¹⁰⁶ It is significant that Wells describes the obliteration of the London streets in cartographic terms; the city's careful 'network' of 'houses, churches, squares, crescents, gardens' is made 'derelict', and it looks as if 'some monstrous pen had flung ink upon the chart'.¹⁰⁷ London loses its 'coherency' as its 'police organization', and 'even the railway organisations' become nebulous and inefficient, 'guttering, softening, running at last in that swift liquefaction of the social body'.¹⁰⁸ In 'The Return', the noise of Hervey's thoughts expresses a similar dismantling, in this case of a belief system which is grounded in custom, ritual, and social connections. These prove to be tenuous once challenged by a crisis. Hervey is the vulnerable product of this superficially connected city. He personifies the orderly streets in which he lives, and is only momentarily able to feel truly alive and like a

¹⁰⁵ Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, p.164.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.105.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.104-5.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.92.

‘simple human being removed from the delightful world of Crescents and Squares’ (*TU* 114).

Chapter 3

Hearing the News in *The Secret Agent*

At the beginning of 'The Return', Hervey and his fellow City businessmen rush home with their 'hastily folded evening papers that resembled stiff dirty rags of a greenish, pinkish, or whitish colour' (*TU* 103).¹ The implied plenitude of newspaper provision reflects the reality: until 1905, when the *Evening Standard* and *St James's Gazette* amalgamated, Londoners could choose from no fewer than twelve morning and nine evening papers.² And the newspaper world is not just in the background of 'The Return': as I have discussed in the previous chapter, Hervey's personal crisis begins when he learns that his wife has left him for a journalist in their social circle. Journalism has even more of a presence in Conrad's later work, *The Secret Agent*; as Peter Mallios has noted, this is filled with references to the press, from the description of the 'obscure newspapers' (9) in the window of Verloc's shop to the end of the novel, where Ossipon is haunted by the 'rhythm of journalistic phrases' (231) used to report Winnie's suicide.³ Ossipon is fascinated to learn how Winnie first knew about the explosion at the Greenwich Observatory: 'How did you first come to hear of it?' (208). This is a question often posed about Conrad's own sources of information for the

¹ The *Globe* had been pink since 1868 and the *Sporting Times* was also pink. The colour also indicated the time of the edition; in 1905, the 'extra special' and other late editions of the *Evening News*, for example, were pink, while the lunchtime edition was green.

² Noted in *Master Printer and Newspaper Owner*, 18 February 1905, p.22.

³ Peter Mallios, 'Reading *The Secret Agent* Now: The Press, the Police, the Premonition of Simulation', in *Conrad in the Twenty-First Century: Contemporary Approaches and Perspectives*, ed. by Carola Kaplan, Peter Mallios, and Andrea White (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.155-172 (p.156).

actual explosion which occurred in 1894. These have been the subject of much critical exploration.⁴ However, less well explored is the wider question of how news might travel across this print-bound city, including how it may be heard, and the part played by the exigencies of time, social class, and an individual's location.

It would seem that Conrad was keen to emphasize that he heard rather than read about the bombing. His opinion of the newspapers has been well documented. In the essay 'Poland Revisited', Conrad asserted that he was 'Never a very diligent reader of newspapers', considering that they provided news which was 'atmosphere-less, perspective-less' (*NLL* 114). The evidence suggests otherwise; as Donovan notes, 'John Conrad recalled his father being engrossed by newspapers until 10.30 each morning'.⁵ However, as far as his inspiration for *The Secret Agent* is concerned, Conrad continued to dismiss the influence of newspaper reports on its central story. Writing in 1923, he insisted: 'I was out of England when it happened, and thus I never read what was printed in the newspapers at the time' (*CL8* 165). Furthermore, in the Author's Note, Conrad famously asserts that 'the subject of the Secret Agent – I mean the tale – came to me in the shape of a few words uttered by a friend in a casual conversation' (4).

For Jonathan Arac, Conrad's reference to the conversation, generally believed to have been with Ford, explicitly locates his inspiration within an 'urban oral tradition'.⁶ This chapter will focus on that tradition, in contrast to other readings of this novel which have considered Conrad's

⁴ See, for example, Norman Sherry, *Conrad's Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), and, more recently, Mary Burgoyne, comp., 'Conrad Among the Anarchists: Documents on Martial Bourdin and the Greenwich Bombing', *Conradian*, 32:1 (2007), 147-85, and Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets*.

⁵ Donovan, p.9.

⁶ Jonathan Arac, 'Romanticism, Self, and the City: *The Secret Agent* in Literary History', *Boundary 2*, 9:1 (1980), 75-90 (p.82).

treatment of journalistic style. Michael Greaney, for example, describes Conrad's London as a city rendered into a 'veritable graveyard of authentic language' by a populist press.⁷ However, it needs to be remembered that the late-1880s, when this novel is set, were a transitional period for the transmission and consumption of information.⁸ Working- and lower-middle-class Londoners would still have been attuned to experiencing the 'news' out on the city's streets from the patterers and broadside sellers, who had traditionally sung about the events of the day. Vestiges of these ancient traditions survived rather longer than might be expected. The sensational Florence Maybrick case of 1889 had, for example, revitalized the sale of broadsides and with it the singing of the latest events.⁹ Edgar Wallace's *The Four Just Men* (1905) also describes this practice. There, the news of the anarchists' threats to the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs is sung in verse on the streets: 'itinerant street singers, introducing extemporised verses into their repertoire, declaimed the courage of that statesman bold'.¹⁰ As David Vincent describes:

Those whom the patterers and singers sought to detain were on the move in several senses. Not only were they hurrying about their business or strolling between occupations, but they were also undergoing an evolution from an oral-cum-written to a written-cum-oral means of exercising their imagination.¹¹

As I will discuss further in a later section, this traditional (aural) experience of the news is present in *The Secret Agent*, through the description of the shouting newsboys, from whom Ossipon first hears

⁷ Michael Greaney, *Conrad, Language and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.136.

⁸ The novel is generally assumed to be set between 1886-7.

⁹ See Michael Diamond, *Victorian Sensation* (London: Anthem, 2004), p.182. Florence Maybrick was imprisoned and sentenced to be hanged in 1889 for poisoning her husband. See also Palmer (p.134), who notes the continuance of ballad singing on the streets in the 1890s and early-1900s when a series of murder cases engaged the popular imagination.

¹⁰ Edgar Wallace, *The Four Just Men*, in *Four Complete Novels* (London: George Newnes, 1931), pp.82-3.

¹¹ David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.203.

about the Greenwich explosion. The newsboys epitomize a transitional era for popular experience of the news and their practice also highlights the unique role played by sound in the despatch and receipt of information.

It is useful to observe at the outset that, despite all the references to newspapers in *The Secret Agent*, we don't witness much actual reading of them (Ossipon and Stevie aside). We learn, for example, that Winnie Verloc had merely 'glanced at a morning paper as usual' (155) on the day of the Greenwich explosion, while her husband's newspaper reading is similarly qualified as 'looking at' (134; 155). Most significantly, Winnie does not glean her information about Stevie's death from a newspaper, but from a conversation that she overhears between Heat and Verloc. This information communicates itself through 'muttering' and 'murmurs' and other auditory clues, such as Heat speaking 'emphatically' (157; 158; 159). As Aaron Fogel argues, Winnie is thereby characterized as 'someone hypersensitive to sound and information'.¹² As for Heat's 'extra special', that appears to have been purchased merely because 'He was interested in horses' (156). Elsewhere in the novel, the Professor is described as 'gazing abstractedly at the print' (59) of Ossipon's newspaper while Michaelis, as the Professor observes, 'never looks at the newspapers' (225).

In fact, apart from Ossipon, the novel's only other significant newspaper 'reader' is Stevie, although, as will be discussed further below, Winnie clearly reads enough to be haunted by lurid headlines. For Peter Nohnberg, Stevie is an archetype of the 'half-educated modern

¹² Aaron Fogel, *Coercion to Speak: Conrad's Poetics of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.170.

readers' satirized in Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891).¹³ Mallios agrees with this reading, arguing that Stevie is a 'consummate figure not only of a certain kind of newspaper reader but of the modern newspaper itself'.¹⁴ After the explosion at Greenwich, as Mallios notes, Stevie's shattered body is likened to a collection of rags, which recalls both the shabby clothing of the newspaper sellers outside the Silenus restaurant and their 'damp, rubbishy' (65) papers. Concurring with Nohrnberg's reading, Mallios argues that the impression of Stevie's body thus forms a 'palimpsest-image' of the newspaper 'rags' which occur elsewhere in the novel.¹⁵

Certainly, in a novel set in the late-1880s, Stevie is of the generation to have benefited from the 1870 Education Act and consistent with this he is *The Secret's Agent's* most enthusiastic reader. However, it should be recalled that Stevie is also represented as a half-educated 'listener'. 'Perfect slave to verbal suggestion', Ossipon comments about Stevie in the stage version of *The Secret Agent*, a remark which is consistent with the boy's characterization in the novel.¹⁶ There, Winnie expresses her concern that Stevie 'isn't fit to hear' the anarchic talk at the Brett Street shop: this, she observes, causes him to get into 'his passions' (50). Later in the novel, we learn that Stevie is 'easily impressed by speeches' (133), as is indicated by his reaction to the cabman's utterances about his hard life, which, delivered with 'boastful exasperation' (128), have engaged Stevie's sympathy. When Winnie later explains her own perspective on the way the world works, she must choose her words with care, as the very sound of certain of these can startle her brother. Such detail

¹³ Peter Nohrnberg, "'I wish he'd never been to school": Stevie, Newspapers, and the Reader in *The Secret Agent*', *Conradiana*, 35:1-2 (2003), 49-61 (p.50).

¹⁴ Mallios, 'Reading *The Secret Agent* Now', p.157.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ *The Secret Agent: A Drama in Three Acts* (London: T. Werner Lawrie, 1923), p.50.

suggests that Stevie symbolizes a half-witted listener in the crowd, a figure for whom, as W.H. Henley and his circle feared, passionate speeches were likely to have more impact than reasonable ones. However, through the ironic tone of the narration, Conrad invites us to question such stereotypes and sureties. Stevie is clearly not a smooth talker: he is 'no master of phrases' (131). Given Conrad's antipathy towards the type of vacuous and iterative 'parrot' speech which did anything but express ideas with 'clearness and precision' (131), this trait engenders a sympathy for Stevie which increases when he comes out with his ironically precise statement 'Bad world for poor people' (132).

It seems debatable how far Conrad intended Stevie, or any of his other characters, to represent an 'Edwardian reading public' as Nohnberg suggests.¹⁷ As Rubery notes, the number of people buying a newspaper had nearly quadrupled between 1880-1914.¹⁸ Given the period during which this novel is set, its 'readers' may therefore be situated near the beginning of this rise in newspaper consumption. By the late-1880s, newspaper reading had clearly lost the novelty value that it held for the working- and lower-middle-classes in the 1860s. However, for *The Secret Agent's* characters, the practice of regular newspaper reading is clearly not so commonplace as to be unworthy of comment. For example, the Assistant Commissioner's remark to Sir Ethelred that 'I read the papers' (112), suggests a defensive response to a social superior, not the expression of an inconsequential daily routine. Similarly, Verloc takes pains to assert to Vladimir that 'he was in the habit of reading the daily papers' (25). Such comments suggest that newspaper reading is still bound up with individual perceptions of social status.

¹⁷ Nohnberg, p.5.

¹⁸ Rubery, p. 7.

Newspaper reading must also have been a time-consuming process in an era when even popular papers such as the *Echo* and the *Standard* presented their news across six or seven columns of densely-set type. It would be hardly surprising if the working- or lower-middle-classes, like the Verlocs, did little more than ‘glance’ at their papers. A more detailed perusal of the news might be enjoyed by the leisured upper-classes, impractically attired in their tailcoats, as personified by the man in ‘evening dress’ (18) at the Embassy, reading his newspaper by the fire.¹⁹ In portraying the habits of Verloc and his circle, Conrad may also have been alluding to contemporary perceptions that the working- and lower-middle-classes were engaging in ‘skimming’ the news rather than proper ‘reading’. As Rubery has noted, the layout of papers such as Harmsworth’s *Daily Mail* (launched in 1896) was perceived to encourage a superficial attention to content.²⁰

It should also be recalled that, in this transitional era, literacy itself would have encompassed a wide range of reading ability. The notion of ‘IT literacy’ today makes a useful point of comparison. ‘Literacy’ is hard to quantify, and will continue to be so until a generation dies out and a baseline of ability becomes the norm to such an extent that the ‘illiterate’, like non-readers today, become an identifiable group. In the years immediately preceding the 1870 Education Act, this would have been particularly apparent. In the context of Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5), Richard Altick has argued that such a range of ability defined an era in which individual literacy could be ‘total’, ‘partial’ or

¹⁹ It appears that a social distinction between the readers of the morning and evening papers persisted into the Edwardian era. A 1909 cartoon in W.H. Smith’s trade journal contrasts a top-hatted, spats-wearing ‘morning reader’ with a bowler-hatted ‘evening reader’ (*The Newsbasket*, August 1909, p.179; W.H.Smith Archive, Swindon).

²⁰ Rubery, p.10.

‘intermittent’.²¹ In *Our Mutual Friend*, Boffin comments admiringly about Silas Wegg that ‘all Print is open to him!’, a remark which expresses how reading abilities could vary, as could, of course, the difficulties of the texts to be encountered.²² An 1865 survey of sailors’ reading abilities identified similar nuances, classifying some, for example, as ‘indifferent’ readers.²³ The Education Act offered, as in Stevie’s case, an ‘excellent system of compulsory education’ (13) through which to learn to read and write. However, during the years immediately following its implementation, the differences between generations would have been especially apparent. During his sailing career in the 1870s, 1880s and early-1890s, Conrad would have encountered varying degrees of reading ability, as his description of Singleton’s reading in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* suggests. There, old Singleton struggles to read Bulwer Lytton’s *Pelham* with ‘slow labour’ and, like a child, has to vocalize some of the words in order to make sense of them: ‘his lips [...] moved in inward whisper’(9). Kennerley’s studies of the documents entitled ‘Agreement and Account of Crew’ of the merchant ships on which Conrad served indicate that one in ten of his shipmates may have been illiterate, as they signed with a cross.²⁴ However, drawing on literacy studies, Kennerley notes that such data may be misleading due to the social sensitivities surrounding the ability to read and write, which was sometimes concealed out of sympathy for those who were illiterate.²⁵

Perhaps Verloc (whether by ability or habit) may be located as an ‘indifferent’ reader. Certainly we learn from the narration that Verloc is

²¹ Altick, Richard D., ‘Education, Print, and Paper in *Our Mutual Friend*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literary Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Lionel Stevenson*, ed. by Clyde de L. Ryals (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), pp.237-54 (p.248).

²² Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.49.

²³ Quoted by R.K. Webb in ‘The Victorian Reading Public’, *Universities Quarterly*, 12 (1957-8), 24-44 (p.33).

²⁴ Alston Kennerley, ‘Conrad’s Shipmates in British Ships’, *The Conradian*, 37:1 (2012), 58-79 (p.74).

²⁵ Ibid.

‘not a well read person: his range of allusive phrases was limited’ (136). Such ironic terms recall Conrad’s treatment of Stevie’s speech and also elicit sympathy: Verloc does not *sound* educated, which is something of a social drawback. As I have argued in Chapter 1, Verloc’s characterization subverts the social stereotype of the self-improving workman and so such an observation from the third-person narration is also consistent with this characterization.

Out of all *The Secret Agent*’s characters, it is arguably Ossipon who is the most ‘modern’ in the way he experiences the news of the Greenwich explosion. The manner in which he gleans his information will provide the focus for this chapter. Firstly, it is useful to consider the city’s ‘information superhighways’, the major thoroughfares in which to make transport connections, send telegraphs, have random encounters with friends and acquaintances – and, most importantly, to hear the news.

A well-connected city

‘The object of a street,’ as businessman Buck opines in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, ‘is to lead from one place to another’.²⁶ Such a view was arguably enshrined in London’s thoroughfares, including those which had been newly created by the improvement programme of the 1880s and 1890s, like Charing Cross Road, and more ancient routes, like the Strand. As Lynda Nead has discussed, the Strand had an especially symbolic significance for Victorian Londoners.²⁷ As the major linking route between East and West, it connected the centres of finance (The City), commerce (the West End) and government (Whitehall). To this might be

²⁶ Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, p.128.

²⁷ Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p.161.

added the Strand's function as a centre of news distribution, due to the proximity of Fleet Street. The Strand was a place where one might be spotted amongst the crowds, like Verloc, who is seen by Chief Inspector Heat, 'coming out in a hurry from a jeweller's shop' (101), a sighting which allows the policeman to make chronological speculations about Verloc's movements. This street was famous for its noise and bustle, as was suggested by the cover of the *Strand Magazine* which showed a street crowded with people and traffic. The Strand was also stereotypically a location where the home-coming imperial traveller might encounter friends from his travels, and re-establish connections made thousands of miles away in the British colonies. In an article in the *Strand Magazine* in 1907, the eponymous street is described by one contributor as the 'face' of London, in an account which emphasizes this thoroughfare's 'Englishness':

No street seems to me less cosmopolitan, more characteristic.[...] It is the homely Strand that so often greets the English home-comer after his exile, and the look and the smell and the gentle roar of it brings the lump to his throat.²⁸

These observations are consistent with the experience of the un-named narrator in Conrad's 'Karain' (1898). It is in the Strand that the narrator encounters Jackson at the end of the story: 'he had just come home – had landed that very day!' (*TU* 47). The two men exchange their memories of Karain and time spent in the East: the 'news of yesterday' (*TU* 47).

In 'Karain', Conrad uses the term 'innumerable' to describe the crowd in the Strand and his impressions of multifarious and disconnected images suggest a city so vast that it defies understanding. As Hampson argues, the city is presented as an 'unreadable text' which is 'resistant to

²⁸ 'Which is the Most Interesting London Street? A Collection of Opinions', *Strand Magazine*, September 1907, p.321.

intellectual comprehension and control.’²⁹ The city is equally overwhelming in auditory terms, so much so that the narrator’s and Jackson’s ears ‘were filled’ by a sound suggestive of the aural composite, an ‘underlying rumour’ composed of ‘panting breaths’ (*TU* 48) so numerous that they blend into one. As I have discussed in the Introduction, such auditory ‘blends’ may be identified as intrinsically modern. Here, Conrad’s impression of a ‘rumour vast, faint, pulsating’ (*TU* 48) also suggests a multiplicity of voices which have been combined into a single note. That note, which sounds like a ‘rumour’, is surely intentional in a street so associated with the news. The impression of a ‘headlong shuffle and beat of rapid footsteps’ (*TU* 48) adds pace to a scene which echoes that at the start of ‘The Return’, as the City businessmen also rush ‘headlong’ (*TU* 103) from the underground station. This is a city where time is of the essence and walking is not wandering but being propelled forwards in ceaseless motion. In keeping with the Strand’s status as one of London’s great arterial roads, the imagery of breathing is suggestive of a great urban heartbeat. Conrad’s description of the Strand as being ‘deep as a well and narrow like a corridor’ (*TU* 48) foregrounds the impression of an arterial thoroughfare lined by tall buildings, within which the acoustics of a surrounding ‘stir’ (*TU* 48) of ambient sound may have been especially apparent.

In ‘Karain’, this urban scene in the Strand makes for a powerful sensory contrast with the Eastern Archipelago, the main location for the story. As Karain tells his story, a single, distinctive voice breaks through with all the power and audible contrast in tone and pace that the spoken world can convey:

²⁹ Hampson, ““Topographical Mysteries””, p.162.

His expressions came straight from his tormented heart. His words sounded low, in a sad murmur as of running water; at times they rang loud like the clash of a war gong – or trailed slowly like weary travellers – or rushed forward with the speed of fear. (TU 29)

This is the very antithesis of ‘parrot-speech’ which, as I have argued in Chapter 1, is associated with the urban crowd in Conrad’s work. It is especially far removed from the vacuous rhetoric of social agitation; indeed, to make the contrast between the city street and Karain’s world even more apparent, Conrad provides a glimpse amongst the urban crowd of a group of Donkin-types: a ‘knot of dirty men with red neckerchiefs [...] discussing filthily’ (TU 48).³⁰ As in *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* and ‘The Return’, the imagery of London’s disorderly mob is present, in this case through the comparison of the ‘narrow ragged strip of smoky sky’ to a ‘soiled streamer flying above the rout of a mob’ (TU 48). Even the London skies have something of the chaos of the streets about them, in imagery which recalls a demonstrating crowd with their banners, who have been stirred (‘routed’) into action.

Once back in London, the men can only recall Karain’s world through the blandness of the newspapers, references to which frame the story. At the beginning, the narrator describes how he and his fellow travellers now glean ‘intelligence of various native uprisings’ from the ‘befogged respectability’ (TU 13) of newspapers. This is news which lacks a clear perspective, a trait which Conrad would later associate with the newspapers in ‘Poland Revisited’. A series of impressions of the Eastern Archipelago follow which foreground its actuality in sensual terms, although ironically at the end of the story, it will be the seemingly ‘senseless’ Strand which appears to be more real to the narrator. At the end of the story, Jackson refers to the news, in a description which suggests that

³⁰ Commitment to the socialist cause was often demonstrated by the wearing of a red scarf. See, for example, the revolutionist Horne in ‘The Informer’, who wears a ‘red muffler’ (SoS 83).

he has just seen a headline: ‘I saw a paper this morning; they are fighting over there again’ (*TU* 47). The ubiquitous presence of the press is further made apparent by the street news-seller who ‘yelled horribly in the mud the name of a paper’ (*TU* 49). For the narrator, all such disjointed sights and discordant sounds signify home and real life. However, the narrator’s perception that all this denotes reality, in contrast to the Eastern Archipelago, is made ironic by the impression that this is a city in the throes of a communal heart attack. As I have noted in Chapter 2, there are similarities here with Hervey’s response to the city in ‘The Return’, through the detail of the ‘gasping voices’ (*TU* 48) of people on this mighty thoroughfare. Furthermore, their ‘blank faces’ (*TU* 48) suggest the crushing effect of an overload of sensory experience, which Jackson expresses at the end of the story. As Jackson says, the city may be ‘strong and alive’, but it can ‘smash’ the individual, as a result of which, Karain’s story seems to be more ‘real’ (*TU* 49).

There is a further irony at play here in that the narrator perceives Jackson as a distinctive figure who stands out amongst the crowds on the Strand: ‘He was magnificent as ever. His head was high above the crowd’ (*TU* 47). This impression does not suggest an individual who is vulnerable to becoming crushed underfoot by the teeming masses. The narrator’s perspective arguably derives from a Western ideal of the heroic imperial traveller. Such a figure walks tall amongst the crowd, as this manifests itself at home, on the London streets, and abroad, amongst the vast populations of the East. Douglas Kerr has noted how, since the eighteenth century, impressions of the multitudes of the East had caused alarm and dismay for Western colonial travellers wanting to exert control

and power.³¹ As Kerr has argued in the context of Conrad's *Lord Jim*, this led to perceptions about the individuality and visibility of the Western colonist amongst the Eastern crowd, impressions of whom had been 'produced and sharpened by the teeming numbers around them'.³² This is an interesting context in which to locate Jackson, whose power and ostensible confidence are arguably debunked by Conrad through a form of urban 'come-uppance', whereby the power of the city is shown to outweigh that of the individual. In 'The Return', Hervey is subjected to the same treatment, as is the Professor in *The Secret Agent*, who fears the urban crowds despite possessing the means to destroy them.

Conrad's choice of the Strand for this episode of 'Karain' is clearly deliberate. In particular, the presence of Bland's gun shop recalls the type of work with which Jackson and the narrator have been engaged.³³ For a contemporary readership, familiar with the Strand's iconic status, this detail also offered a bleak reminder of the realities of imperialism in this fashionable and ostensibly 'homely' street. More broadly, Conrad's bleak impressions dismantle the popular trope of the Strand's urban pageant, through which modernity was expressed by the noise and bustle of happy crowds, not the sinister sounds of panting and gasping.

While only a bystreet, Brett Street, like the Strand, is presented in *The Secret Agent* as something of a conduit for the 'news'. The novel's frequent references to Soho have led to a general presumption that Brett Street may be located in the environs of Soho Square, near Oxford Street. McLaughlin has argued that Soho had a useful symbolism for Conrad: associated with the cosmopolitanism, exoticism, and wildness of the East

³¹ See Douglas Kerr, *Eastern Figures: Orient and Empire in British Writing* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p.53.

³² Ibid.

³³ As Hampson has argued, gun-running is a 'recurrent motif' in Conrad's work, including this story, in which the narrator and Jackson are supplying Karain with arms. See *Conrad's Secrets*, pp.27-8.

End, it was nevertheless situated near to the West, thus providing, according to McLaughlin, a ‘way of managing or coping with the horrific magnitude of a metropolis conceived as an almost infinite urban jungle’.³⁴ It should be noted, however, that Soho encompasses Leicester Square, a cosmopolitan district which was also associated with anarchist activity.³⁵ It is possible that Conrad had envisioned Brett Street as one of the tributary roads leading into Leicester Square. Walpole recalls a conversation in 1919, when Conrad mentioned that his inspiration for Verloc’s shop was a building in Green Street (now Irving Street), which connects Charing Cross Road to Leicester Square.³⁶ Between 1890-97, Green Street was widened from a bystreet into a thoroughfare to accommodate the greater volume of traffic flowing from the new Charing Cross Road, which had replaced the narrow Castle Street.³⁷ Kelly’s Directory for 1887 lists businesses which include picture-dealing, ivory-turning, and engraving.³⁸ As Hans van Marle comments ‘Not a very likely location for a somewhat shady Soho shop, but the remark [to Walpole] does suggest that Conrad had a rather precise topography in mind when writing *The Secret Agent*, a topography perhaps connected with the Charing Cross Road’.³⁹

The interesting feature of Green Street is its centrality and connectivity to the rest of London. A short walk to the west (as Verloc undertakes at the beginning of the novel) led to wealthy Piccadilly, St James’s and

³⁴ McLaughlin, p.145.

³⁵ Soho is in the parish of St Anne’s, which includes Leicester Square. The Leicester Square district is discussed in detail by Judith R. Walkowitz in *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), pp.53-56.

³⁶ See *Joseph Conrad: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by Martin Ray (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p.156.

³⁷ See *Survey of London*, Vol. 34: The Parish of St Anne, Soho, general editor: F.H.W. Sheppard (London: Athlone Press, 1966), p.503.

³⁸ *Kelly’s Directory of London*, 1887 (London: Kelly’s Directories, 1887). Green Street also has an interesting literary connection as the supposed site of Dickens’s ‘old curiosity shop’. See Tambling, p.86.

³⁹ Hans van Marle, “‘Shades of Reality’: A Little of Conrad in *The Secret Agent*”, *The Conradian*, 3:1 (1977), 6-8 (p.7).

Belgravia, while the poverty and deprivation of the Seven Dials were relatively close by to the east; to the south were the Strand, and Whitehall, the centre of government. Like Verloc, other major characters in this novel traverse the city, and the manner in which this movement progresses the exchange of information is thus inextricably linked to London's topographics.

To keep functioning as a global centre of commerce, the increasingly well-connected city had, of course, to be chronologically consistent and precise. *The Secret Agent* is set in a period when time had only just been standardized by Greenwich Mean Time.⁴⁰ This promised certitude and regularity, virtues which may be defined as modern and urbane, in a city once characterized by the chaos of its ancient streets. It is notable that the narrator of 'Karain', rather as he appreciates the Strand for its solid materiality, also takes comfort in the solid ticking of the ship's chronometers, having just listened to a story of ghosts and mystic charms:

The silence was profound; but it seemed full of noiseless phantoms, of things sorrowful, shadowy, and mute, in whose invisible presence the firm, pulsating beat of the two ship's chronometers ticking off steadily the seconds of Greenwich Mean Time seemed to me a protection and a relief. (*TU* 38)

The chronometer is reassuring for the narrator because, like the Strand, it seems 'real' and provides him with an impression of spatial and temporal solidity. In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad uses a specific event to surround such temporal certitudes with ambiguity and it is notable in this context how, as Harkness and Reid have commented, Conrad's references to the timing of the Greenwich explosion are inconsistent.⁴¹ Ossipon's newspaper suggests that it happened at 'Half past eleven'

⁴⁰ Greenwich Mean Time had been in use on the British railways since the 1850s but was only formalized as the national standard for time in 1880.

⁴¹ Bruce Harkness and S.W. Reid, 'Notes', *The Secret Agent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.420.

(59), yet later we learn that Heat knew about it ‘a little before eleven’ (68) from a telegram to his police department. Harkness and Reid suggest that this is a case of Conrad commenting on the inaccuracy of newspaper reporting. However, in a narrative which disrupts chronological time, this mismatch also raises some significant questions about the temporality of information in this era. Firstly, in a period where speed of communication was increasing, supported by new technologies, there was still the question of who should be the first to benefit from a piece of information. As Iwan Rhys Morus discusses, this became a sensitive issue after the telegram’s invention in the late-1830s, when journalists soon began to accuse the clerks from the Electric Telegraph Company that they were prioritizing communications heading to *The Times*.⁴² The reporting of a supposed revolution in Ireland in 1848 brought matters to a head, when journalists from the *Morning Herald* complained that the ETC clerks had communicated the news to Downing Street before sending it to the *Morning Herald*. This case raised important issues over the ownership of news, while also providing an early indication of the print media’s evolving sense of self-importance and empowerment.

The issue of precedence in receiving news clearly impinges on the professional life of the Assistant Commissioner, for whom the tyranny of needing information by the hour is especially pressing. It was important to be ‘first with the news’, as W.H. Smith claimed. The contemporary press boasted of news from the ‘latest telegrams’ which offered both speed of information and a visually recorded exactitude of timing. Like the telephone, as Philip Horne has shown, the telegram overturned

⁴² Iwan Rhys Morus, ‘The Electric Ariel: Telegraphy and Commercial Culture in Early Victorian London’, *Victorian Studies*, 39:1 (1995), 339-78 (p.369).

‘previous conceptions of *presence*’.⁴³ The exchange of information was no longer reliant on being in the right place at the right time, and it was therefore seemingly easy to get overtaken by events, as the Assistant Commissioner expresses through his concern that Heat, his professional subordinate, might have ‘already’ (95) dispatched a telegram about Michaelis’s involvement with the explosion.

There was also the issue of the reliability and veracity of the news. Traditionally, sound had given news its authority, as in the case of the town crier’s bell, the news-seller’s horn, and the church bell. As I have discussed in the Introduction, the church bell exemplifies a traditional sound, once imbued, as Corbin has explored, with the power to authorize the news.⁴⁴ Corbin discusses how the ringing of a church bell reinforced the authority of the information on a poster and substantiated rumour: ‘In a universe of information dominated by the flexibility of rumour, the bell confirmed the density of truth on events’.⁴⁵ In the modern city, the reverse was arguably now the case: nothing was deemed to be true until it had been printed and the aural ‘rumour’ was only confirmed once it had appeared in print. However, that relationship between sound and the announcement of the news persisted in, for example, the naming of the telegram’s transmitter as an ‘annunciator’ or ‘sounder’. As Jay Clayton has argued, the use of sound to transmit information was not intrinsically ‘modern’, as this process (which also utilized touch) had a corporeality to it, which recalled older means of communication like the bell.⁴⁶ Clayton notes the interesting interrelationship between the aural and the visual in

⁴³ Philip Horne, ‘Absent-Mindedness: Ford on the Phone’, *Ford Madox Ford’s Modernity*, ed. by Robert Hampson and Max Saunders (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), pp.17- 34 (p.20).

⁴⁴ See Corbin, p.169.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jay Clayton, ‘The Voice in the Machine: Hazlitt, Hardy, James’ in *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production*, ed. by Jeffrey Masten, Peter Stallybrass, and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.209-32 (p.211).

the middle of the nineteenth century, when the new telegraphic technologies developed, and conflicts arose as to whether aural or optical messaging systems should be adopted.⁴⁷

The telegraph and the telephone continued to assert the traditional authority of sound as a means of relaying information. To use Clayton's term, there was something 'deviant' about this experience which could not be readily assimilated into the characteristically visual 'regime of modernity'.⁴⁸ In this context, it is interesting to note how some of the titles of anarchist publications (consistent with their appeal to a working-class readership) allude to that combination of urgency and authority which a sound had traditionally supplied. There was, for example, the *Alarm*, an anarchist publication to which Conrad alludes in 'The Informer', fictionalizing it as the *Alarm Bell*. Ford Madox Ford's cousins Olive and Helen Rossetti (writing as 'Isobel Meredith') also use the symbolism of a warning bell through the *Tocsin*, their fictional name for *The Torch*.⁴⁹ These were 'rousing titles', of the type sold in Verloc's shop, where a similar allusion to information and audibility is suggested by *The Gong* (9).

By the late-1890s, the sound of the telephone bell was beginning to exert its own form of authority, although, as a letter to *The Times* complains, Britain was regarded as being at the 'tail of civilization' in its usage.⁵⁰ As I have discussed in the previous chapter, fears of the mighty city becoming disconnected were enhanced by the knowledge that its communication systems were becoming increasingly complex. The telephone offered an 'immediacy', as Horne discusses, and asserted its

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.212.

⁴⁹ Isobel Meredith, *A Girl Among the Anarchists* (London: Duckworth, 1903). See Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets*, pp.89-91, for an account of the Rossetti sisters and this publication.

⁵⁰ Letter to the Editor, *The Times*, 29 October 1897, p.6.

own temporality, in addition to locality.⁵¹ The telephone also simultaneously offered connectivity and took it away: whilst engaged in a private communication, the individual was necessarily disengaged from their immediate surroundings. Ford describes this effect in *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926) from the tetralogy *Parade's End*. There, the imperious sound of the telephone competes for the attention of Valentine Wannop during the noisy celebrations marking the end of the First World War. Valentine is called to the 'wicked telephone' and as a result misses the sound of what would become one of the twentieth century's most defining events:

She didn't even know whether what they had let off had been maroons or aircraft guns or sirens. It had happened – the noise, whatever it was – whilst she had been coming through the underground passage from the playground to the schoolroom to answer this wicked telephone. So she had not heard the sound. She had missed the sound for which the ears of the world had waited for years, for a generation.⁵²

The sound of the telephone has a 'stunning, invasive impact' in this episode, as Horne notes.⁵³ Horne ascribes this to Valentine's psychological confusion over the identity of the speaker, a theme with which Ford had engaged in his earlier work *The Call* (1910). However, there is also a conflict between private and public space in this episode, and a simultaneous foregrounding of personal gossip over communal news. Like a newspaper purchased for private consumption, the telephone can bring outside 'news' indoors. The individual voice in the machine also has the power to set its own agenda, as in this case, when the sound of Edith Ethel Duchemin 'spitting out' personal gossip denies Valentine

⁵¹ Horne, p.18.

⁵² Ford Madox Ford, *Parade's End* (London: Penguin, 2002), p.505.

⁵³ Horne, p.30.

the communal experience of hearing the sound that would bring ‘the greatest stab of joy that had ever been known by waiting millions’.⁵⁴

Some of the telephone’s putative influence, menace even, is present in the Assistant Commissioner’s office in *The Secret Agent*, where he sits amongst the ‘tubes’ of the internal phone system which allows for communication within his department: ‘Speaking tubes resembling snakes were tied by the heads to the back of the Assistant Commissioner’s wooden armchair, and their gaping mouths seemed ready to bite his elbows’ (78).⁵⁵ In London, these suggest a world of reports, information and routine and are associated with the ‘futility of office work’ (80). The Assistant Commissioner is now a connected man, and the snakes provide an ironic reminder of the life he had once enjoyed out in the colonies, before returning home and marrying a wife with ‘influential connections’ (80). As I have discussed in the previous chapter, there are episodes in ‘The Return’ (and elsewhere in *The Secret Agent*) where Hervey and Verloc respectively engage with the ‘out of doors’ beyond their windows. It is notable that in this scene the Assistant Commissioner spends an extended period at his office window, seemingly contemplating the London rain. The relentless rain provides a reminder of the chaotic power of the elements over the ‘lofty pretensions’ of ‘mankind’ (80). This is a city choked and drowned by the ‘raw fog’ and the ‘cold rain’ (80) and also by the man-made constrictions (as the snakes especially evoke) of servitude to routine. As is consistent with Conrad’s sympathetic characterization of the Assistant Commissioner, the world beyond the window does not provide a threat but rather a reassurance of an alternative, and simpler, reality.

⁵⁴ Ford, *Parade’s End*, pp. 504-5.

⁵⁵ Harkness and Reid note that the police continued to favour the telegram over the telephone as a more private means of communication until c1910 (*The Secret Agent*, p.420).

As noted above, the Assistant Commissioner is also in thrall to information-bearing telegrams. In this context, we can appreciate his sense of regained freedom when he escapes the office for the streets, setting off in the direction of Verloc's shop, to acquire his information by traditional (and potentially more reliable) means. By the late-1880s, the telegram had a longstanding reputation as an instrument of manipulation as much as a means of verification and authorization, leading it to be dubbed the 'tell-lie-graph'.⁵⁶ This reputation is apparent in Henry James's 'In the Cage' (1898), as is the isolation of the operator, who gleans private information about the social life of wealthy London, whilst remaining isolated from it. All day the operator is 'fed with facts and figures' about this 'panorama': she hears the city's 'wondrous world-music' in the messages sent, yet she is trapped in her 'little hole-and-corner'.⁵⁷ The telegrams tease her with a knowledge of the city beyond her limited experience which amounts to merely being 'brushed by' a 'bouquet' during the 'daily grind'.⁵⁸ The telegram operator is thus simultaneously 'wired' to the city, and yet, by dint of her class and occupation, is excluded and reduced to the role of a mere observer and listener.

The new technologies also promised certitude of information, but were all prone to disruption, from the accident, the co-incidence, the deliberate deception or simply the unexpected. In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad utilizes the infamous London fog to disrupt the clarity of information which might have been gleaned about the Greenwich explosion. A local policeman had been there, a 'fact', which he repeats, but, through the fog, has experienced the explosion corporeally as a 'heavy flash of lightning'

⁵⁶ John Durham, *Telegrams in Victorian London* (London: Golden Hand Press, 1959), p.8.

⁵⁷ Henry James, 'In the Cage', *In the Cage and Other Tales* (New York: Norton, 1969), p.186-87.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

(70), the concussive effect of which had ‘made him tingle all over’ (71). Verloc had heard a ‘bang’ and is vague about its timing, only commenting simply, that it ‘came too soon’ (158). Such accounts remind us that there are two sides to a news ‘event’: the primary sensual experience, and the ‘after the event’ recording. The chronology of an event and its aftermath is also revealed to be problematic as it is contingent not just on an individual’s perception but on his or her attitude towards time. For example, Verloc’s recollections about the time of the explosion are vague; the police, in contrast, demand detail.

As Hermia Oliver notes, the actual Greenwich explosion of 15 February 1894 was communicated to Scotland Yard by letter, leading to the inspector responsible being fined £4.00, a severe penalty which would seem to reflect the contemporary drive for communicating at speed.⁵⁹ Within the construction of *The Secret Agent*’s plot, the privilege of being the first to learn about the explosion is accorded to Ossipon, who hears the news from the shouting newsboys on the streets. Later in the novel, we discover that Chief Inspector Heat already knew about the incident by this time, from the telegram sent to his department. This structure disrupts chronological time and foregrounds the idea of this event as a human story, not a piece of ‘atmosphere-less’ news. Such a foregrounding is suggested because, as I will discuss further in the next section, Ossipon’s experience of the news is random and co-incidental, and heard, via the newsboys, as an exciting ‘tale’.

Although *The Secret Agent*’s subject matter is inextricably linked to a major news ‘event’, Conrad encourages us, from the dedication and Author’s Note onwards, to treat this as a ‘simple tale’, the chronology of

⁵⁹ Hermia Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late-Victorian London* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), p.101. Oliver notes that the fine was reported in *The Times*, 22 February, 1894, p.5.

which defies exactitude. To use Benjamin's terms, Conrad resists that version of events which, as in the case of a report, gets to the 'pure essence of the thing', and chooses instead to foreground the 'story' or 'tale', which 'sinks the thing into the life of the story-teller'.⁶⁰ In a work without Marlow to foreground the experience of story-telling, we have in *The Secret Agent* a contrast between those who experience the event at Greenwich as a simple tale (like Verloc) and those who engage with it as information (like the police). As Hampson has argued, story-telling is the central theme of Conrad's later work 'The Partner', which was first published in 1911.⁶¹ There, a contrast is drawn between the magazine writer, who has to 'cook' his story for 'consumption' (WT 128), and the stevedore, who is vague about time in his spoken narrative and is represented by Conrad as being comfortable with the essentially random nature of events. While the magazine writer seeks 'connections', the stevedore is untroubled by the notion of 'accidents'. Looking over the rocks of Westport, for example, the stevedore recalls Dunbar's London office in a back street near Cannon Street station. This imaginative linking of two such seemingly different places makes a 'remote connection', the writer /narrator suggests. The stevedore's response is 'Connection? To Hades with your connections. It was an accident'. The magazine writer's persistence – 'an accident has its backward and forward connections' (WT 92) emphasizes the extent to which he seeks order and precision.

In his 1905 essay 'The Fine Art', Conrad seemingly associates exactitude of timing with the modern age, through a contrast between the sensual experience of the old sailing-ships and the punctiliousness of the

⁶⁰ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations*, p.91.

⁶¹ Robert Hampson, 'Story-tellers and Storytelling in "The Partner," "The Informer," "The Lesson of the Master," and *The Sacred Fount*', in *Conrad, James and Other Relations*, ed. by Keith Carabine, Owen Knowles, and Paul Armstrong (Lublin: Marie-Curie-Skłodowska University, 1998), pp.123-46.

new steam-ships. The steam-ship demands a 'less personal and a more exact calling; [...] Punctuality is its watchword. The incertitude which attends closely every artistic endeavour is absent from its regulated enterprise' (*MoS* 30). To apply this description to the modern city, London was increasingly just such a 'regulated enterprise', the smooth running of which was dependent on the certitudes of information, reports, and timetables. In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad describes those who are on the margins of this vast enterprise, like the Verlocs, who are attuned only to the commercial exigencies of an old and 'cracked' shop bell.

Winnie, like her husband, is indifferent to chronological time. Her murdering of Verloc does have a temporal significance but this is abstracted by Conrad through a description which evokes the narrative of humanity itself. Two ages combine in Winnie: the ancient and the modern. In terms which recall Nordau's theories of degeneration, Winnie has put into the plunging knife 'all the inheritance of her immemorial and obscure descent, the simple ferocity of the age of caverns, and the unbalanced nervous fury of the age of bar-rooms' (197).⁶² Winnie's suspicion of clock time is suggested by her response to the sound of ticking, which she first imagines as the clock, looking at it 'with inquiring mistrust' (198). Remembering that the clock has 'no audible tick' (198), Winnie's response becomes purely auditory: she 'strained her hearing to locate the sound' which seems like 'the pulse of an insane clock' (199). A contrast is thereby drawn between the 'natural' (Winnie's response and the sound of Verloc's trickling blood) and the 'mechanical' (the sound she expects to hear, of the clock).

⁶² Ellen Burton Harrington has argued that there are also echoes here of Lombroso's *The Female Offender* (1895), in which he posits theories about maternal passion and the regression of women into primitivism. See 'The Female Offender, the New Woman, and Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*', *The Conradian*, 32:1 (2007), 57-68.

As J.A. Bernstein has argued, Conrad engages with such ‘dilemmas of chronological uncertainty’ in *The Secret Agent*, as is consistent with a historical period when time was the subject of much debate.⁶³ It is certainly notable that time is often audible in this novel, through impressions which, as in the above episode, draw attention to a clock. Another example is the clock in Sir Ethelred’s Whitehall office, a ‘heavy, glistening affair’ in marble, from which emanates a ‘ghostly, evanescent tick’ (107). Such a fine clock seems ironically appropriate for a powerful figure like Sir Ethelred for whom time is important and who has ‘no time’ (106) for the detail of the Greenwich explosion, as he informs the Assistant Commissioner. In contrast, the Verlocs have an old clock, with a ‘drowsy’ (49) tick on their landing, and another, seemingly inaudible, in the parlour. Both are arguably somewhat redundant in a shop which is open at random times, according to the requirements of its seedy clientele.

The shop is being watched by the police, as is suggested by Conrad’s impressions of the ‘measured footsteps’ (49) in the street outside. This recalls that surveillance could be audible. The impression that footsteps are pacing out ‘all eternity’ in a ‘night without end’ (49) reinforces the idea of London as an unceasing and regulated enterprise, for which some groups, like the government, the police, and the press, were setting the relentless pace. The footsteps are thus the sound of civic power. This is timely, measured, deliberate, and unceasing, qualities which are also made audible through Conrad’s impressions of Big Ben, which booms its ‘brazen blast’ (224) over Ossipon’s cowed head at the end of the novel. This sound expresses the progress of time in the mighty city and reminds the individual of his own ‘scurvy, shabby, mangy little bit of time’ (228). This is Ossipon’s realization, expressed as a parting shot for the Professor

⁶³ J. A. Bernstein, “‘No Audible Tick’: Conrad, McTaggart and the Revolt against Time’, *The Conradian*, 37:1 (2012), 32-45 (p.44).

the following day. In contrast, the Professor appears to believe he owns time, insofar as his timed detonator offers liberation from, as he terms it, a 'God' and a 'master' (227).

Unlike Winnie, Ossipon is characterized by Conrad as being 'well informed' (229). Ossipon seeks precision of timing and in this respect may be located as a more 'modern' figure than Winnie. Throughout the day, we see Ossipon attempting to impose chronological order on to what is a coincidence of random movements around the city's streets, as in the case of the almost but not quite collisions of Heat and the Assistant Commissioner at No. 32 Brett Street. Ossipon uses the timings of the popular press to help locate and connect the day's events. For example, he is precise about the newsboys' cries, telling the Professor 'They have been yelling the news in the streets since two o'clock' (58). Later, he will tell Winnie how he went to Verloc's shop, 'Directly I read the paper' (204) and he recalls that he met the Professor 'Ten minutes after seeing the evening paper' (205). Ossipon also plans and times his abandonment of Winnie with a 'savage resolution' while cooking up his own imaginative and simple tale about a 'dying mother' (223). However, he is mindful that modern communications (the availability of a telegraph service) might render suspicious an act of 'impulse' (224) like jumping from a moving train instead of simply staying on it until Southampton and sending a telegraph home. As he informs the curious guards, this can not be done: 'the telegraph offices being closed' (223).

Organized by the timings of popular newsprint, Ossipon is nevertheless accustomed to experiencing news communally. Having heard about the Greenwich explosion out on the street, he mulls over the 'idea of going for news straight to the shop' (64). The real Greenwich explosion occurred at 5.00 (according to press reports) in the afternoon of 15th

February 1894 and was reported the following day by popular papers like the *Echo*, the *Globe* and the *Standard*. These papers make no reference to earlier reports, which suggests that the news of the explosion came too late to have been reported in either the ‘special editions’ or the ‘late editions’ of the previous evening (published at 7.00).⁶⁴ Through shifting the fictional event to mid-morning, Conrad therefore allows for his novel to depict the movement of the news across the city during the course of the day. This process is begun by the cries of the newsboys, whose presence in the novel recalls the ancient practice of ‘crying’ the news and also the different ways in which public spaces were utilized for news exchange in the late-Victorian city.

Noise and the newspapers

As suggested above, Ossipon’s experience of the news of the Greenwich explosion recalls a practice that was noisy, intrusive and mobile: ‘A newspaper boy had yelled the thing under his very nose’ (54). In many ways, the newsboys epitomized their transitional age. Burdened by the need to shift the tonnage of contemporary newsprint, their cries nevertheless recalled oral traditions of communicating information. As Joyce’s Professor MacHugh comments about the newsboys’ cries in the Aeolus episode of *Ulysses*, theirs was the sound of ‘oratory’.⁶⁵ The newsboys’ skills hearkened back to ancient practices which transformed news into a public event from which it was hard to escape. In *Ulysses*, Bloom’s experience of this is similar to Ossipon’s: a ‘newsboy cried in Mr Bloom’s face’ the news of a ‘Terrible tragedy in Rathmines!’⁶⁶ Descriptions of newsboys recur throughout fiction either published or set

⁶⁴ The latest evening editions of these newspapers do not appear to have survived.

⁶⁵ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p.137.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.140.

during the late-Victorian and early-Edwardian period, and this presence deserves more attention than it has received.

In *The Secret Agent*, the textual presence of the newsboys provides a narrative device by which an event can be set in motion. This is also the case in Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), where Jekyll first hears the news of Carew's murder being cried in his square.⁶⁷ More broadly, however, fictional descriptions of the newsboys foreground some of the temporal and spatial considerations which affected the manner in which news was heard in the city. These also recall the interrelationship between visual and aural experience of the news: the newsboys encouraged the passers-by to purchase a newspaper for private consumption indoors, while simultaneously transforming the news into a very public and noisy event.

Out on the London streets, news could be heard before it was read: in Henry James's 'The Papers' (1903), for example, the journalist Maud Blandy first hears about the (presumed) death of Beadel-Muffet out on the street.⁶⁸ This is advertised as 'Extraordinary News!', a cry which is carried by the newsboys along the streets from the Strand, forcing those wanting more information to stand still and wait until it came to them 'with a burst'.⁶⁹ The press were engaged in creating a sense of urgency, a phenomenon which James expresses through the experience of Blandy, who starts to feel like an 'edition' herself:

an 'extra special', coming out at the loud hours and living its life, amid the roar of vehicles, the hustle of pavements, the shriek of

⁶⁷ Robert Lewis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror* (London: Penguin, 2002), p.26.

⁶⁸ Henry James, 'The Papers', in *Maud-Evelyn, The Special Type, The Papers, and Other Tales* (London: Macmillan, 1923), pp.162-3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, pp.162-3.

newsboys, according to the quantity of shock to be proclaimed and distributed.⁷⁰

This was a ‘grotesque mingling of profit and panic’, as the narrator terms the news-vending in *The War of the Worlds*, a work in which the interrelationship between reading and / or hearing about an event is also foregrounded.⁷¹ Rather as Ossipon is interested in how Winnie has heard about the Greenwich explosion, Wells’s narrator mulls over how news of the Martians’ landing in Woking reached London. The narrator’s brother only realizes the true import of what has happened when he encounters ‘a couple of sturdy roughs’ running from Fleet Street ‘with still wet newspapers and staring placards’, bawling ‘Dreadful catastrophe!’ and ‘London in Danger!’ and demanding the inflated price of threepence for their papers.⁷²

The sense of being pursued by a sensational news event appears to have been a part of everyday urban life. Such was the experience, for example, of the publisher Grant Richards at the time of the Whitechapel murders in 1889:

And then later, in the house, when it was almost time to pack up and go to bed, suddenly in the distance one would hear shouting. One knew. The shouting of newsboys. Nearer and nearer it came. Another Whitechapel murder. Another murder...⁷³

This experience also recalls the contrast between the ‘indoors’, where news could be privately consumed, and the world of the streets, in which traditional news-vending naturally belonged. In Mrs Belloc Lowndes’s *The Lodger* (1913), the impoverished Bunting is engaged by the sound of the newsboys’ cries, as the portent of information from the outside world:

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.79. See Rubery (p.136) who notes how the noise of Fleet Street is associative of the professional lives of Blandy and Howard Bight.

⁷¹ Wells, *The War of the Worlds*, p.82.

⁷² Ibid., p.77.

⁷³ See Richards, pp. 117-118.

Suddenly, across the stillness of the dark November evening there came the muffled sounds of hurrying feet and of loud, shrill shouting outside – boys crying the late afternoon editions of the evening papers [...] the shouts came through the closed windows and thick damask curtains [...] those shouts, those hoarse, sharp cries must portend that something really exciting had happened.⁷⁴

Bunting despairs that he cannot afford the penny which will allow him ‘to know what was happening in the world outside’ and muses that only criminals are denied this experience.⁷⁵ The cheap newspapers connected the working-classes to the wider public life of the city. In *The Secret Agent*, the insularity of Winnie and the Professor from this experience is symptomatic of their existence on London’s margins.

Conrad’s stage version of *The Secret Agent* (1923) gives an impression of the precise manner in which the Greenwich explosion may have been cried out on the streets. While Winnie sits inside sewing, a newsboy’s cry is heard as ‘*a distant voice...high pitched*’.⁷⁶ Here the news takes the form of an aural headline: ‘Greenwich Park outrage. All the details!...Bomb in Greenwich Park...Latest edition...Bomb...’⁷⁷ Heat’s surprise that Winnie has not heard the newsboy ‘yelling at the end of your street’ recalls that this was a trade of volubility and of skill, on which economic survival depended, in making the news urgent or sensational enough to attract the curiosity of the public.⁷⁸ Heat tells Winnie the details of the news: ‘The Greenwich Park Outrage they call it. Revolutionaries. Anarchists...’⁷⁹ This form of oral presentation had been a skill which had been honed by the ‘patterers’, the newsboys’ mid-

⁷⁴ Mrs Belloc Lowndes, *The Lodger* (London: Pan, 1947), pp.9-10. Set in the late-1880s, this was Belloc Lowndes’s fictional account of the Whitechapel murders.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ *The Secret Agent: A Drama in Three Acts* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1923), p.134.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.138. An 1897 report describes a vendor being arrested for ‘crying false news’. He had called out ‘Horrible Murder at Hackney’, thereby obtaining his pennies under ‘false pretences’, as the arresting policeman claimed that the event was more accurately described as a ‘suspicious death’. See *Newspaper Society Circular*, December 1897, p.2.

⁷⁹ *The Secret Agent: A Drama in Three Acts*, pp.134; 138.

century predecessors, who, Mayhew observed, ensured the audibility of words like ‘Murder’, ‘Horrible’, ‘Love’, ‘Mysteries’, and ‘Former Crimes’.⁸⁰ While the street cries were designed to appeal to the ear, the increasingly pervasive wall advertisements, placard and shop frontages, all aimed to attract the eye. Amongst the latter category were the sandwich-board men, the silent walking advertisements, whom Conrad depicts at the end of ‘Karain’. At the end of *The Secret Agent*, Ossipon fears he will become a board-man, whose ‘leather yoke’ (231) symbolized a descent into poverty and commodified pedestrianism.⁸¹

In contrast to the sandwich-board men, the newsboys were fully engaged with the life of the streets, and with transforming ‘information’, to use Benjamin’s terms, into an exciting ‘story’, which was instantly accessible to the newly literate working- and lower-middle classes, amongst whom we may place the Verlocs. A combination of sensational stories (including the above-mentioned Florence Maybrick case and the Whitechapel murders), an underclass needing casual work, and the intensively competitive selling practices of the popular press, had ensured that this practice continued into the Edwardian era. The boys’ economic survival also depended on their speed and mobility, and their practice exemplified the frenetic pace of urban life. As news sped from wire to newspaper to street-seller, the newsboys arguably set their own timing, as James’s Maud Blandy experiences. A contemporary account notes, for example, that the news of Florence Maybrick’s reprieve had been shouted through the streets of London by the *Globe*’s newsboys before it reached

⁸⁰ Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Vol. 1 (London: Frank Cass, 1967), p.222.

⁸¹ As T.R. Nevitt discusses, mobile advertisements can be traced back to the 1820s, when they were used to avoid paying advertisement duty in newspapers. See *Advertising in Britain: A History* (London: Heinemann, 1982). By the 1870s, the ‘melancholy sandwich-man’, a ‘perambulatory advertisement’, was widely regarded as one of the city’s most depressing sights, and emblematic of the poor and marginalized: see Henry Sampson, *A History of Advertising from the Earliest Times* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1874), p.31.

the Liverpool prison where she was being held.⁸² Londoners in any position of influence, like the journalist or the policeman, were thereby haunted by the anxiety that others may have already heard about an event. Exclusion from the informational loop meant being at the mercy of events having ‘already’ happened, as the Assistant Commissioner fears. Ossipon is similarly perturbed that the police had ‘already’ (209) been to Brett Street by the time he encounters Winnie Verloc.

At the end of the novel, Ossipon is haunted by the newspaper phrase describing Winnie’s suicide: ‘*This act of madness or despair*’ (229). Conrad clearly intends us to understand that this phrase originates from Ossipon’s ‘much-folded newspaper’ (228). However, in a novel where the experience of hearing the news is also present, the lexis and iambic rhythm is interesting for its suggestion of the oral ballad form. Winnie takes her fear of the gallows from ‘illustrative woodcuts to a certain type of tales’ (201) as much as she does from newspaper columns and whilst these are print forms, Conrad nevertheless establishes Winnie’s sources of information as rather vague and imprecise: ‘She seemed to have heard or read that clocks and watches always stopped at the moment of murder for the undoing of the murderer’ (202).

Winnie’s experience of the news also draws attention to the significance of London’s topography. The newsboys cried their headlines along major thoroughfares like the Strand and Tottenham Court Road; stuck away in a bystreet, Winnie is, therefore, out of earshot, as Brett Street was ‘not a street for their business’ (155). Her lack of awareness of their cries, especially as expressed in the stage version of the novel, also serves to reinforce her insularity and separation from the world around her. As I have noted in the Introduction, impressions of the city

⁸² H. Simonis, *The Street of Ink: An Intimate History of Journalism* (London: Cassell, 1917), p.97.

as a 'background' were described by Ford in *The Soul of London* and recur in other contemporary writing about London. Conrad's characterization of Winnie suggests that the city is just such a background for her: there is no sense that she is engaged with the urban rush.

Winnie shares this characteristic of detachment with the Professor, who has managed to travel by bus to the Silenus restaurant without hearing news of the explosion. The Professor personifies the inhumane and disinterested city, and those who lead an atomized existence within the crowd. It is notable that Ossipon – who is curious that the Professor has not 'heard' the news of the explosion – tries to assume a demeanour of 'indifference' (54) in his presence. Conrad presents two different manifestations of the urban mood: the one engaged and connected (Ossipon), the other resolutely disinterested and detached (the Professor). In this respect, Ossipon's encounter with the Professor is similar to that experienced by Heat. Heat is a sympathetic character who is very much part of the urban scene around him. Having run into the destructive Professor near the corner of Tottenham Court Road, Heat (rather like the narrator of 'Karain') takes a simple comfort in the sounds of the city around him. Such sounds clearly signify life for Heat, in a situation where he is facing the prospect of being blown into oblivion, leaving behind at most a newspaper headline. As a policeman, Heat's day-to-day existence still revolves around the city's streets, although through the description of the tangle of paper and speaking tubes which surround the Assistant Commissioner, Conrad provides a glimpse of a more interiorized future. Heat hears the city as a background, but experiences none of the isolation that this typically provoked: 'The murmur of town life, the subdued rumble of wheels in the two invisible streets to the right

and left, came through the curve of the sordid lane to his ears with a precious familiarity and sweetness' (76).

Tottenham Court Road may be regarded as a rather seedier version of the Strand, insofar as it too was a place for random encounters, especially as the 'corner' provided a major stopping-point on the city's omnibus routes. From the top of one's bus one might witness there, like Ford, the 'Poetry of the normal', 'a stimulating, comfortable, jangling confusion'.⁸³ Like the Strand, this was an arterial road, along which the newsboys found plenty of customers: a contemporary account describes the boys chasing buses down Tottenham Court Road in pursuit of a sale.⁸⁴ However, as the meeting between the Professor and Heat suggests, this road and those around it were also associated with anarchist activity.

By the 1890s, the newsboys' cries were the subject of increasing complaints in a city where notional 'improvement' encompassed quieter streets. Heard from a distance, their cries were indecipherable, leading to the impression of a wild, alien noise. Newspaper reports and correspondence from this time describe the sound as a 'senseless bawling', and a 'yelping'.⁸⁵ Using similar terms, James describes their sound as a 'howl' in 'The Papers'.⁸⁶ Along with the other street-sellers and ballad singers, the newsboys' appeal was emotional and immediate; the ubiquitous placards and advertisements may have been equally hard to ignore in this era, but nothing could compete with the raw power of sound. As Walter Ong has argued: 'Sight isolates, sound incorporates. Whereas sight situates the observer outside what he views, at a distance,

⁸³ Ford, 'Literary Portraits: XX111 – The Year 1907', quoted by Max Saunders in 'Ford, the City, Impressionism and Modernism' in *Ford Madox Ford and the City*, ed. by Sara Haslam (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 67-80 (p.69).

⁸⁴ J. Ewing Ritchie, *Days and Nights in London; Or Studies in Black and Gray* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1880), p.217.

⁸⁵ Supplement to *The Publishers' Circular*, 20 July 1895, p.4, and 28 December 1895, p.6.

⁸⁶ James, 'The Papers', p.162.

sound pours into the hearer'.⁸⁷ Like the papers they sold, the newsboys were adept at creating a 'sensation'. However, the sound of news headlines arguably had a greater impact on the listener than their printed counterpart: out and about on the city's streets, the passers-by could not avoid hearing the news – it 'poured in', to use Ong's terms, and thus demanded immediate attention.

Complaints about the noise of all such street traders led to the setting-up of the 'Association for the Suppression of Street Noises' in the 1890s, echoes of which appear in Conrad's 'International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs' (95) in *Heart of Darkness*. As Conrad's description of the 'dismal row of newspaper sellers' (65) outside the Silenus suggests, the trade also provided a depressing reminder of the poverty in the city's heart. The newspaper 'boys' (some as young as ten, some otherwise unemployable old men) looked and sounded 'poor' in contemporary terms, while their Cockney phonetics and boisterous behaviour recalled the 'street arabs', roaming uncontrolled through the city streets. Sherlock Holmes's 'unofficial force', a gang of 'ragged little street arabs', whom he calls the 'Baker Street Irregulars', may be located alongside the newsboys as reminders of a past age when movement around the city and the exchange of information could be a random and chaotic process.⁸⁸

If the type of bureaucracy surrounding the Assistant Commissioner typified the modernity of exchanging information privately, quietly and efficiently, the newsboys seemed more at home in the ancient city, where news exchange was unregulated, random, and noisy. To the Victorian gentleman in his club, therefore, the shrieks of the newsboys were not

⁸⁷ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.72.

⁸⁸ Conan Doyle, 'The Sign of Four', in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), p.90.

only meaningless and tiresome but perhaps suggestive of ‘savage customs’ uncomfortably close to home. In 1890, a *Times* correspondent (from the Athenaeum club) complained: ‘no one can walk through any of the West-end thoroughfares without being deafened by the strident yells of ragged urchins’.⁸⁹ Like the sound of the cabmen in Hervey’s square in ‘The Return’, this sound seemingly emanated from the East End and invaded the potential peaceful sophistication of the West, as the wild newsboys moved through the spaces that one class increasingly wanted to keep private from another.

Annoyance at the newsboys’ noise was also enhanced by an increasing impression of its redundancy, given the vast quantities of print now available. These made ‘all shouting superfluous’, the same *Times* correspondent noted, supporting the demands for Parisian-style newspaper kiosks where ‘all the latest editions may be bought quietly’.⁹⁰ In 1894, the *Globe* noted that London was the only European city without these, reflecting a city which was looking to Paris as a civilized urban model in its modernization of social customs.⁹¹ Purchasing a newspaper out on a noisy street was now seen as inconsistent with gentlemanly behaviour, as an anecdote in Arnold Bennett’s 1898 diary expresses, where he recalls his aunt’s distaste at the contemporary practice of selling newspapers on a Sunday.⁹²

As Juliet Soskice recalls in her memoirs, anarchist papers like *The Torch* were also sold on Sundays and ‘cried’ in public places like Hyde Park and Regent’s Park.⁹³ This was another London: a city of

⁸⁹ Letter to *The Times*, 13 November 1890, p.6.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ *Globe*, 15 February 1894, p.1.

⁹² See Arnold Bennett, *The Journals*, ed. by Frank Swinnerton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p.51.

⁹³ See Juliet M. Soskice, *Chapters from Childhood: Reminiscences of an Artist’s Grand-daughter* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1921), pp.26-27. Soskice was Ford’s sister and wife of the Russian revolutionist David Soskice.

democratically open and noisy spaces, as I have discussed in Chapter 1. In Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), Reardon muses on this other milieu, which contrasted with the interior world of subdued reading-rooms frequented by hack writers like himself. Reardon considers what it might be like to live a less orderly and 'inoffensive life', asking Biffen: 'Why don't we run amuck against law and order? Why, at the least, don't we become savage revolutionists, and harangue in Regent's Park of a Sunday?'⁹⁴

In addition to the parks and bystreets off the main thoroughfares, the coffee-stalls, typically at intersections and 'corners' of the thoroughfares, also seem to have played a role as places where, as 'Isobel Meredith' notes, anarchists might convert the poor through 'quiet personal argument and the distribution of literature'.⁹⁵ The power of sound to shock, to engage, and thereby convert, had long been recognized. As Iain McCalman has discussed, political singing had concerned the establishment since the eighteenth century, precisely because of its appeal to the less literate, and a long-held view in English popular culture that songs had a 'magical power' which print lacked.⁹⁶ In topographic terms, auditory contrasts may thereby be drawn between the legitimate noises of news and commerce which were heard on an imperially symbolic thoroughfare like the Strand and the sound of sedition to be heard in the parks and on street-corners, and in quiet bystreets, like Conrad's Brett Street, where Ossipon and his fellow anarchists gather. In such places news was still a shared experience, and the anarchic potential of this was clear. To use Vincent's terms, Verloc's shop can be located within London's 'constellations of private neighbourhoods, bounded by their

⁹⁴ George Gissing, *New Grub Street* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.367.

⁹⁵ Isobel Meredith, p.131.

⁹⁶ See Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.118.

dependence on the spoken word'.⁹⁷ 'Isobel Meredith' describes the liveliness in *The Torch's* one-time headquarters in Ossulton Street, off Euston Road: the 'noise and hubbub, the singing, the discussions and disputes, the readings, the hammerings on this side, the bangings on that'.⁹⁸ As Hampson has noted, anarchist premises and activities were under constant surveillance by the police.⁹⁹ In terms which express the temporal exactitudes of professional life in the modern city, Heat boasts of knowing what the anarchists are doing 'hour by hour' (69). Knowledge of this procedure is shown by Ossipon. After the bombing, he fears that No.32 Brett Street is being watched by the police, and he considers the 'idea of going for news straight to the shop', but worries it may have become a 'police trap' (64). The sweeping away of such anarchist locations was implicit in London's reconstruction process of the late-1880s and 1890s. Conrad describes this process in 'The Informer', where the anarchists' meeting place in Hermione Street is completely obliterated: 'improved out of any man's knowledge. The name exists still, but not one brick or stone of the old Hermione Street is left now' (*SoS* 80).

The memoirs of 'Isobel Meredith' refer to a police report, quoted in a newspaper, which describes the 'self-styled clubs' which were in actuality 'hotbeds of conspiracy and murder'.¹⁰⁰ Such an impression was clearly intended to create alarm amongst the newspaper's readership, in a city where the exclusive gentlemen's clubs epitomized respectable London. Traditionally places for the communal consumption of news, they appear to have played their own part in the development of the telegraph, due to

⁹⁷ Vincent, p.230.

⁹⁸ Isobel Meredith, p.250.

⁹⁹ See Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets*.

¹⁰⁰ A contemporary news report quoted by Isobel Meredith, pp. 292-3.

the clubs' habitués wanting their racing results as quickly as possible.¹⁰¹ In *The Secret Agent*, the presence of The Explorers' Club, and attitudes towards it, recall the extent to which such places were becoming increasingly exclusive. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, some social campaigners had an agenda to make the city more 'open', while others sought to reduce the risk of a social invasion. The government private secretary Toodles is, for example, alarmed to learn that Vladimir is a member: 'It revolutionised his idea of the Explorers' Club's extreme selectiveness, of its social purity' (164). The exclusivity of The Explorers' Club is expressed through a door which is clearly firmly shut to unwanted social intruders. As the Assistant Commissioner tells Vladimir: 'You're not going in here' (172). As Markman Ellis has discussed, the gentlemen's clubs had themselves evolved from the coffee houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, where news had also traditionally been shared and discussed.¹⁰² Between 1790 and 1830, the coffee houses had become radicalized, which led to their regulation and eventual transformation into the 'closed shops' of the gentlemen's clubs. In *The Secret Agent*, as Toodles's reaction suggests, the social, political, and national 'purity' of such places is made apparent. While at one end of the social spectrum, news is exchanged amongst the cosmopolitan anarchists of Verloc's shop, at the other, it might be consumed within the exclusivity of The Explorer's Club. The former operates like a type of 'self-styled club', for which the door is shut during the day and 'discretely but suspiciously ajar' (9) at night.

The 'salon' of the Lady Patroness of Michaelis is another exclusive locale in which the well-informed and socially well-connected sought their intelligence about the outside world. This is where Vladimir goes for

¹⁰¹ See Simonis, p.96.

¹⁰² Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).

his news, and where the Lady Patroness is keeping up with world events, in a house which is equally open to the anarchist, the foreign embassy official, and the policeman:

Royal Highnesses, artists, men of science, young statesmen, and charlatans of all ages and conditions, who, unsubstantial and light, bobbing up like corks, show best the direction of the surface currents, had been welcomed in that house, listened to, penetrated, understood, appraised, for her own edification. In her own words, she liked to watch what the world was coming to. (83-84)

The salon is heard as a 'hum of voices' (84) to which Vladimir has attuned himself. Vladimir 'had a drawing room reputation as an agreeable and entertaining man'; he makes 'droll connections between incongruous ideas' (20). The Lady Patroness's salon functions rather like an upmarket social gossip paper, which is there to provide the 'surface currents' of events in the outside world.

In 1858, the journalist Walter Bagehot had likened London itself to a newspaper:

Everything is there, and everything is disconnected. There is every kind of person, in some houses, but there is no more connection between the houses than between the neighbours in the lists of 'births, marriages and deaths'. As we change from the broader leader to the squalid police-report, we pass a corner and we are in a changed world.¹⁰³

In *The Secret Agent*, Conrad evokes similar impressions of an isolating and emotionally disconnected city. Unlike Dickens's London, the late-Victorian city presented a civic paradox (rather like the populist press, the telegram, and the telephone) of simultaneously offering and resisting engagement with public life. There was now also a unity of civic vision, achieved through the creation of the London County Council in 1884. In

¹⁰³ Walter Bagehot, 'Charles Dickens', *National Review*, 7 October 1858, pp. 458-86. Quoted by Tambling, p.2.

contrast, in Dickens's London, as Jeremy Tambling has explored, individual districts existed as separate worlds, and the city was a place in which to 'go astray' in the labyrinthine maze.¹⁰⁴ In *The Secret Agent*, as in 'The Return', Conrad describes a city in which an individual's survival is dependent on topographic, social, and cultural connectivity and purposeful movement between destinations.

'Why this compulsion to walk?' asks Martin Ray of Verloc *et al.* in *The Secret Agent*.¹⁰⁵ He suggests that this expresses a 'commitment to the streets [which is] equivalent to a commitment to life'.¹⁰⁶ However, perhaps Conrad describes rather the status of purposeful walking in the modern city. It was important to have somewhere to go, and to be aware of the quickest route by which to get there. Getting 'easily diverted from the straight path of duty by the attractions of stray cats and dogs' like 'poor Stevie' (13) was truly the mark of the mentally challenged and /or the waifs and strays in a newly charted city. The employed were bound by the exigencies of the work and transport timetable, in contrast with the poor and unemployed who had nowhere to go. As I have noted in Chapters 1 and 2, the connected city was undermined by the spectre of the latter, and all those who continued to 'loaf' on the city's streets, including the socialist agitators who hung around on street corners and in dark alleys. In this context, we should consider Conrad's anarchists, who were committed to destroying the type of temporal and spatial certainties exemplified by the Greenwich Observatory. The meeting of Heat and the Professor allows for two opposing representatives of pedestrian London to collide. This situation, consistent with a city in a state of socio-cultural transition, is partly coincidental, partly predictable – as the streets around

¹⁰⁴ See Tambling.

¹⁰⁵ Martin Ray, 'The Landscape of *The Secret Agent*, in *Conrad's Cities*, ed. by Moore, pp.197-206 (p.202).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Tottenham Court Road are familiar territory for both. Heat, who walks with ‘purposeful briskness’, epitomizes respectable, modern London, while the Professor, who has the ‘nerveless gait of a tramp’ (77) is paradoxically ‘wired up’, but only to his detonator, not, like Heat, to the great civic project of improvement.

Drawing on de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Bruce R. Smith has suggested that early-modern Londoners ‘followed their own discursive logic’ as they moved across the city, creating a soundscape through their own street-level ‘tactics’ rather than as a result of ‘strategies’ imposed on them by an outside power.¹⁰⁷ Time and space were rather more fluid for the sixteenth-century Londoner, who, as Smith describes, experienced a city which offered ‘a range of paths’ rather than a ‘sociologist’s grid’.¹⁰⁸ Smith identifies how acoustic communities revolving around trade and news exchange were associative of specific districts, like, for example, the streets around St Paul’s. However, such communities also shifted, changed, and overlapped, in contrast to the late-Victorian city, now a place of mighty thoroughfares and similarly impressive buildings, through which notions of permanence and power were materialized. The exigencies of the ‘hour’ were also more pressing in the late-Victorian city, as Conrad makes clear from early on in *The Secret Agent*, through a description of Verloc setting out from the ‘business’ of his shop ‘at the hour of half past ten in the morning’ (15). This episode has the tone of a civic narration emanating from a government department, which approvingly watches Verloc move across a map of London, under a sun – ‘a peculiarly London sun’ – which has ‘an air of punctual and benign vigilance’ (15). Verloc is not, of course, wandering off on his own free will. There is no autonomous ‘tactic’ here,

¹⁰⁷ Bruce R. Smith, pp.55-56.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

as Verloc is *en route* to hear Vladimir's 'strategy', which will determine the fateful walk to the Greenwich Observatory. As a result of this meeting, Stevie, who experiences the city as a co-incidental and chaotic space, is thus fated to become its innocent victim.

In the context of de Certeau's work, Conrad presents a modern city which is a 'place' rather than a 'space', wherein the individual, unlike his sixteenth-century ancestor, has had his 'spatial story' pre-mapped and written for him.¹⁰⁹ As de Certeau posits, a place is 'an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability', while a 'space' is made up of 'intersections of mobile elements'.¹¹⁰ While the late-Victorian city was becoming more mobile, its temporal and spatial predictability nevertheless asserted just such an impression of stasis, which might be interpreted as a civic exertion of power over the individual. It is notable that as Ossipon wanders the streets near the end of *The Secret Agent*, his very corporality – his 'robust form' (224) – becomes insubstantial in response. He traverses patterns of connected streets and his form seems to disappear into their vast perspective:

It was seen crossing the streets without life or sound, or diminishing in the interminable straight perspectives of shadowy houses bordering empty roadways lined by strings of gas lamps. (224)

Just as Winnie runs into the soundless well of Brett Place after murdering Verloc, Ossipon becomes sensually disconnected from the city: 'Comrade Ossipon walked without looking where he put his feet, feeling no fatigue, feeling nothing, seeing nothing, hearing not a sound' (231).

As Hampson has argued, this novel engages with the experience of being unofficially 'in the know' about the machinations of the city's

¹⁰⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), p.117.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

underground activities, such as the politics of anarchism and the transactions of the pornography trade, both of which are symbolized by Verloc's shop.¹¹¹ Thus Verloc has his own 'connection' (102) on the Continent, which makes for a comic contrast with the aspirational social networks managed by, for example, Vladimir and the Assistant Commissioner. The novel also registers the official means of acquiring information, as exemplified by the press, the police and the government. The 'well-informed' Ossipon has been negotiating this complex borderland, but becomes entangled by his relationships with Verloc, the Professor, and Winnie, and ultimately becomes isolated due to his knowledge about the aftermath of the Greenwich explosion. Ossipon knows too much about this single news event and about the city itself. He is thereby fated to become another of its victims.

¹¹¹ See Hampson, *Conrad's Secrets*, pp.102-5.

Chapter 4

Chance and the ‘tone of comedy’

At the end of *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’*, the sailor-narrator describes the conviviality of the ship’s crew as they return to London. Having disembarked from the ship, some cry ‘To the Black Horse! To the Black Horse’ (170), a public house once located on Tower Hill, facing the Board of Trade office.¹ The sailor-narrator describes the ‘illusions of strength, mirth, happiness’ which will be dispensed by the beer, and the crew of the *Narcissus*, with their ‘jovial eyes and clumsy gestures’ (171), seem to be momentarily immune to the cruel city around them. Having been paid off by their ship, the disembarking sailors enjoy a fleeting sense of well-being as ‘castaways’ (172), before being subsumed once more by the city’s economic and social hardships.

The ‘Black Horse’ reappears at the beginning of *Chance*, where Powell recalls his youthful attempts to gain a ship’s berth and thus play his own part in the ‘scheme of world’s labour’ (11). In this novel, the ‘paint, gilt, and plateglass’ of the ‘Black Horse’ present a picture of shabbily gilded poverty, some of the grim realities of which are suggested by the sight of the ‘thin-faced loafers’ (11) leaning against the pub’s doors. In addition to the alcohol, music-hall-style entertainment was often provided by such dock-side pubs, and this seems to have been the

¹ See J.H.Stape and Allan H.Simmons, ‘Notes’, *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’ and Other Stories*, ed. by Stape and Simmons (London: Penguin, 2007), p.430. As Hampson notes, this particular public-house is believed to have been frequented by one of the victims of Jack the Ripper. See *Conrad’s Secrets*, p.264.

case in the real ‘Black Horse’. London County Council Records for the late-1880s and 1890s indicate that this pub was successfully re-licensed for ‘Music and Dancing’ in this period.² This suggests that it may have been one of the old-style ‘sing-songs’ which proliferated around the Docks from the 1850s onwards and were especially numerous on the Ratcliffe Highway.³

As a home-coming ‘Jack-ashore’, Conrad would have been familiar with these pub-based sing-songs, and also with the more established dock-side music-halls. There was, for example, the famous Wilton’s Music Hall, which was located in Grace’s Alley, between Well Street and Wellclose Square, in the heart of the district popularly referred to as ‘Sailortown’. Wilton’s re-opened (after a fire) with something of a fanfare in September 1878, the very month Conrad was staying in the area, having signed off from the *Skimmer of the Sea*.⁴ Ford’s recollections suggest that Conrad had visited music-halls during his career as a sailor and that he was aware of the evolution in style which had occurred over the following years:

Once we were sitting in the stalls at the Empire and Conrad was never tired of wondering at the changes that had come over places of entertainment since his time, when they had lodged in cellars, with sanded floors, pots of beer and chairmen.⁵

² London Metropolitan Archive, LCC Theatres Printed Papers and Sessions 1889-1893, PC/ENT/2/1, List of Notices and Applications for Licences, p.25. See also Diana Howard, *London Theatres and Music-Halls 1850-1950* (London: Library Association, 1970), p.26.

³ See Harold Scott, *The Early Doors: Origins of the Music-Hall* (London: Nicolson & Watson, 1946), p.44. The ‘sing-songs’ were the early forerunners of the music-halls. A contemporary perspective on the development of music-halls is provided by Charles Douglas Stuart and A.J. Park, *The Variety Stage: A History of the Music-halls from the Earliest Period to the Present Day* (London: T.Fisher Unwin, 1895).

⁴ See Peter Honri, *John Wilton’s Music-Hall: The Handsomest Room in Town* (Hornchurch: Ian Henry Publications, 1985). Wilton’s finally closed in 1880. See Kennerley, ‘Joseph Conrad at the London’s Sailor’s Home’, p.88. As Kennerley notes, Conrad had left Lowestoft for London in September 1878. Although he does not appear to have stayed at the Well Street home on this occasion, he stayed there on other occasions between 1888-84 and so was very familiar with the district.

⁵ Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (London: Duckworth, 1924), p.239. Ford may refer to the famous music-hall in Leicester Square but it seems more likely that he means the Shepherds

However, it should also be noted that Conrad would not have needed to visit a music-hall to experience its defining performances. As Havelock Wilson (the founder of the seaman's union) recalls, these were also a feature of the surrounding streets: 'for entertainment you need not go to the theatre or music-hall, but could find it outside the door in Well Street'.⁶ As Wilson recounts, there were singers, dancers, barrel-organ grinders and troupes of minstrels all 'regaling the jolly tars' outside the numerous pubs on this street.⁷

Home-coming sailors visiting the music-halls around the Docks could experience an aspect of 'shore-life' which contrasted with the hard work and discipline on-board ship. As I have discussed in Chapter 1, temperance and religious organizations sought to 'save' wayward sailors. This, it would seem, had been the experience of the *Narcissus's* teetotal and Christian cook Podmore who, as he relates, had taken up with 'bad company' in his youth and 'become intoxicated in an East-end music-hall' (115). As Podmore's experience suggests, music-halls had a reputation for drunkenness and debauchery. In 1891 the *Saturday Review* reminded its readership that while early theatres developed 'under the shadow of the Crown, the music-hall sprang up in the shadow of the Old Bailey'.⁸

No doubt Conrad, like the sailor-narrator in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, may sometimes have 'disengaged' (171) himself from entering the less than salubrious dock-side pubs and music-halls. In the

Bush Empire, where it was his habit, as his sub-editor Douglas Goldring recalls, to correct proofs of the *English Review* during shows. Goldring recalls that Conrad was a frequent visitor to Ford's Holland Park Avenue home during the period 1908-9 when both collaborated on the editing of the *Review*. See Douglas Goldring, 'Low Tastes' in *Reputations: Essays In Criticism* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1920), pp.218-9.

⁶ Wilson, J. Havelock, 'Well Street Sailors' Home. Footprints on the Sands of Time. A Land Mark.' *The Seaman* 4, 24 April 1925, p.320. Quoted by Kennerley, 'Joseph Conrad at the London Sailor's Home', p.82.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ 'Theatres and Music-Halls', *Saturday Review*, 14 March 1891, p.320.

semi-autobiographical ‘Youth’ (1902), he describes Marlow making a ‘rush for London’, where he ‘went to a music-hall, I believe, lunched, dined and supped in a swell place in Regent Street’ (20). ‘Youth’ refers to the period of Conrad’s life between December 1881 and May 1882, when his ship the *Palestine* was docked in Falmouth for repairs. Conrad’s reference to Regent Street suggests that he visited a music-hall in central London, rather than one near the Docks.

A programme for the Oxford Music Hall (located at the Tottenham Court Road end of Oxford Street) provides a flavour of the type of entertainment Conrad might have encountered in January 1882: on that bill, there was a musical overture by Auber, a ballad singer, contortionists and acrobats, the comedians George Leybourne and ‘Jolly Nash’ (‘You will laugh at him, and with him’), and Fred Albert, who is described as a ‘Pattering Champion’.⁹ The presence on the bill of a patter artiste recalls that music-hall’s appeal had always been verbal as much as visual, through entertainments which had evolved from the traditions of *commedia dell’arte* and minstrelsy, while drawing on the verbal skills of the street traders and entertainers. As Conrad had evidently experienced, the entertainments used to be presided over by a chairman, whose verbal clowning involved parodying supposedly middle-class and aristocratic speech, for the entertainment of what had been, in the 1870s and 1880s, a predominantly working-class audience.¹⁰

By the 1890s, music-halls had been developed and commercialized to the extent that some, like the Pavilion, had become striking landmarks in central London. In his essay ‘Stephen Crane’, Conrad recalls that in October 1897 he and Crane ended their wanderings around central

⁹ The Oxford Music-Hall: Programme for week ending 7 January 1882 (V & A Theatre Collection).

¹⁰ See Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall: Culture, Class and Conflict*, trans. by Roy Kift (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.22.

London at the Pavilion at Piccadilly Circus. The Pavilion's history epitomizes both the development and the demise of the music-halls from their early days, to the eventual conversion of many into cinemas.¹¹ The original Pavilion, in Westminster, had been demolished in 1885 and then re-opened on Piccadilly Circus with the impressively 'monumental' facade familiar to Conrad. By the autumn of 1897, the entertainment on offer was rather different to that of the 1880s. Most notably, the programmes included early cinematic shows and, as I will discuss further in the next section, sketches, which revolved around comic situations. If Conrad and Crane had glanced at the posters outside the Pavilion in October 1897, they would have seen the following advertised on the bill: the comedian George Robey, Violet Nelson (a male impersonator), the Brothers Artois (bar performers), the Kellings (acrobats), 'Mr Mark Melford's Company in their Laughable Sketch "Desperation"', and 'Animated Pictures of the Diamond Jubilee'.¹²

As such a programme suggests, the Pavilion offered a range of 'frivolities', and Conrad's own sardonic mention of this in 'Stephen Crane' is consistent with an oft-expressed *ennui* in contemporary literary and journalistic circles for what seemingly passed as 'humour' in popular entertainment. Writing in 1896 in *Nineteenth Century*, for example, the journalist Frederick Wedmore comments on the singers and dancers at Gatti's (at their Westminster Bridge Road venue) that this was a rather tiresome 'vivacity' which could not really be classed as 'humour'.¹³ In similar vein, E.V. Lucas, in the 1910 edition of his much updated and reprinted *A Wanderer in London*, wonders if 'London has reached a high-

¹¹ The Pavilion became a cinema in 1934. The different stages of its history are summarized in Archibald Haddon, *The Story of the Music-Hall: From Cave of Harmony to Cabaret* (London: Fleetway Press, 1935), p.66.

¹² Pavilion Music-Hall: Programme for week beginning 4 October 1897 (V & A Theatre Collection).

¹³ Frederick Wedmore, 'The Music-Halls', *Nineteenth Century*, July 1886, 128-36 (p.133).

water mark of frivolity, or whether new theatres and music-halls are to be added to those already in full bloom'.¹⁴ When in May 1914 Conrad took a party to 'get bored at the Alhambra' (CL5 381), he would have endured a programme memorable for its frivolity and cheeriness, with 'Comedy Club Jugglers', 'Comedy Cyclists', and a humorous revue 'Not Likely'.¹⁵ As war approached, the music-halls had responded with increasingly cheery programmes: 'Keep Smiling' was another hit revue of this period, an instruction which was taken up by the adverts for Odol Toothpaste, which informed audiences of the benefits of 'A Hearty Laugh'.¹⁶

Visual images of music-hall entertainment recur in Conrad's work and these are generally subjected to an ironic treatment, which reveals the dissonance between this mood of relentless gaiety inside the halls and the bleak realities outside on the city's streets. At the beginning of *The Secret Agent*, for example, there are the 'photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls' (9) in the window of Verloc's shop. These may allude to the famous 'Gaiety Girls', who appeared in the musical comedies at the Gaiety Theatre on the Strand. Thomas Postlewait notes that 'shop windows featured them [photographs of the Gaiety Girls], even though the actresses had little or nothing to do with the products being sold'.¹⁷ The images of these dancing-girls – popularly associated with fun, youth and vitality – are, of course, especially incongruous outside Verloc's sordid shop, a haunt of destructive anarchists and a purveyor of pornography. There is a musical equivalent to this form of comic juxtaposition to be heard in the 'Blue Bells of Scotland', as played by the

¹⁴ E.V. Lucas, *A Wanderer in London*, 8th edn (London: Methuen, 1910), p.67.

¹⁵ Alhambra Music-Hall: Programme for week ending 30 May 1914. See also Donovan, p.21.

¹⁶ Alhambra programmes, April-July 1914.

¹⁷ Thomas Postlewait, 'George Edwardes and Musical Comedy: The transformation of London Theatre and Society, 1878-1914' in *The Performing Century: Nineteenth Century Theatre's History*, ed. by Tracey C. Davies and Peter Holland (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.89.

pianola in the Silenus restaurant. When Ossipon leaves the Professor, having had a grim conversation about death and destruction, this tune ‘played him out’ with ‘painfully detached notes’ (65). This is simultaneously the poignant sound of human isolation and of popular tastes for uplifting national airs about the great outdoors. Through an allusion to the latter, Conrad thus sets up a comic incongruity between the grim London streets and Ossipon’s situation, which is reinforced by the term ‘played him out’, suggesting the pianola is performing a ‘turn’.¹⁸ Elsewhere, in ‘The Informer’, there is more dark comedy at play in Mr X’s description of performers from ‘inferior music-halls’ (‘foreign-looking people, jugglers, acrobats, singers of both sexes’) visiting a ‘shabby Variety Artists’ Agency’ run by ‘Bomm’ (*SoS* 82) in a building with a top floor dedicated to the business of making detonators.¹⁹

There was a further potential for ironic comedy in that music-hall had become big business by the Edwardian era: all that seemingly inconsequential ‘frivolity’ was now a serious and slickly run enterprise. Conrad was clearly aware of this change, and the way in which music-hall managers were by now associated as much with an office as with a stage. There is an allusion to the status of such managers in *The Secret Agent*. Faced with the complexities of the Greenwich explosion and the insecurities of his professional relationship with the Assistant Commissioner, Heat feels ‘like a tight rope artist might feel if suddenly,

¹⁸ See Scott, *Songs of the Bourgeois*, p.94. Scottish airs were regarded as being morally healthy due to their association with the outdoor life. The ‘Blue Bells of Scotland’ seems to have been a popular tune of the period. There is a contemporary orchestral version in the British Library Sound Archive: ‘Blue Bells of Scotland’ with variations (ICD0309315, 1905). See also Edward Lee, *Musical London* (London: Omnibus Press, 1995), p.121, which reproduces an advertisement from 1877 for the Queen’s Theatre, Long Acre. This lists ‘Blue Bells of Scotland’ as one of the songs to be played at the Canterbury Music-Hall (Westminster Bridge Road) and ‘rendered audible’ at the Queen’s Theatre by an early form of telephonic device.

¹⁹ Through the reference to the ‘singers of both sexes’, Conrad may allude to the impersonation acts which were very popular at this time, like Vesta Tilley. As Donovan notes (p.200), the music-hall business also had its anarchic element, as indicated by a widely publicized strike by the Variety Artists’ Federation in 1906.

in the middle of the performance, the manager of the Music-Hall were to rush out of the proper managerial seclusion and begin to shake the rope' (92).

At the end of 1910, before he resumed work on *Chance*, Conrad had written 'The Partner', early drafts of which indicate that the music-hall world continued to engage his interest. As Emily Dalgarno has identified, these show that he had originally intended the stevedore to be a manager of two music-halls: the manuscript references 'the "Variety" world he exploited'.²⁰ As Conrad's emphasis might suggest, the word 'Variety' had particular connotations for a contemporary readership. The first 'Royal Command Performance', in July 1912 (from which Marie Lloyd was famously excluded), is often regarded as a symbolic event in music-hall's history, which recognized and reinforced its now established status as a fashionable past-time for the upper-classes.²¹ New styles of performance had gained popular currency, as a taste for 'Variety', typified by comic sketches and large-scale singing and dancing 'spectacles', began to over-take the traditional fare of individual comic songs and stories, as epitomized by the 'lions comiques': Dan Leno, George Leybourne, G.H. Macdermott, and Alfred Vance.²² As I will discuss further below, their tradition of comic story-telling was continued into the Edwardian era by George Robey. However, there was a widespread assumption that such acts had had their day, as the variety 'spectacle' and early cinema seemed to indicate the future direction of popular entertainment.

²⁰ Emily K. Dalgarno, 'The Textual History of Conrad's "The Partner"', *The Library*, 30 (1975), 41-4 (p.42).

²¹ This later became the annual Royal Variety Performance. See, for example, Dave Russell, 'Varieties of Life: The Making of the Edwardian Music Hall', in *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Stage*, ed. by Michael R. Booth and Joel Kaplan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.61-85.

²² The 'Great Macdermott' was famous for popularizing the 'By Jingo' song in the late 1870s. See Scott, *The Early Doors*, pp.148; 170.

The years between 1888-1914 saw the publication of many articles about music-hall in literary journals, as Barry Faulks has identified.²³ The music-halls were of particular interest to literary and social commentators in London where the broadening of the halls' appeal across the social classes was most apparent. Audiences now encompassed the 'society folk' of the West End and the lower-middle-classes of the suburbs in addition to the working-classes.²⁴ As Faulks argues, this widening influence led the literati and the social scientists to re-value music-hall as a 'distinctively English art', which seemingly represented the national character and spirit.²⁵

Amongst the features of music-hall attracting attention were, as I will discuss below, the verbal skills of its star comedians. This is an interesting context in which to consider *Chance*, a work resonating with linguistic games and where Marlow's narration persistently asserts a 'tone of comedy' (176). As Gary Geddes has noted, 'Much of the interest in *Chance* [...] resides in the language itself, in the fine discriminations of meanings, the word-play, the conversational tone, and the use of a wide range of English idiom and colloquial expression'.²⁶ Since 1980, when Geddes posited that his reading might be the first to call *Chance* a comedy, the intrinsic humour of this novel has been more widely appreciated. Katherine Baxter, for example, argues for the influence of Shakespearian comedy on a youthful Conrad, noting that out of the five plays his father had translated, four were comedies.²⁷ As Baxter notes, amongst all Conrad's novels, *Chance* 'wears its comedy most readily on

²³ Barry Faulks, 'Modernism and the Popular: Eliot's Music Halls', *Modernism / Modernity*, 8:4 (2001), 603-21 (p.605).

²⁴ See H.Chance Newton, 'Music-Hall London', *Living London*, Vol.2, ed. by Sims, pp. 222-8 (p.222).

²⁵ Faulks, p.605.

²⁶ Gary Geddes, *Conrad's Later Novels* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), p.80.

²⁷ Katherine Baxter, 'Conrad and Romance: A New Look at Shakespeare and Conrad', in *Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts*, ed. by Baxter and Hand, pp. 111-25 (pp.120-2).

its sleeve'.²⁸ This chapter suggests a more modern influence and begins with a re-consideration of *Chance*'s episodic structure, within which the novel's *dramatis personae* are located in a series of potentially comic situations.

The theatre of the shore

Conrad began work on *Chance* in 1905, picked it up again in 1907, then abandoned it until 1911. In the interim, during the autumn of 1908, he assisted Ford with the editing of the *English Review*. If, as Ford's recollections suggest, Conrad accompanied him to the Shepherds Bush Empire, he would have seen many of the comic 'sketches' which had become popular at this time. The Shepherds Bush Empire's programme for a week in October 1908, for example, includes an entertainment by Stratton, Mills & Co, billed as 'a successful absurdity entitled "Fooled"'.²⁹ In similar vein, the programme for November lists a sketch by Courtice and Louis Ponds called 'Charles – His Friend'; set in 'The Nesting Place, St John's Wood', this includes stock characters: 'a Wealthy Young Widow', 'their Maid', and 'a Young Stockbroker'.³⁰ In an article in the *Contemporary Review* in 1893, the art critic Elizabeth Pennell complains about this type of entertainment and the typical comic sketch which included social stereotypes such as 'the blunt, faithful 'or'ny 'anded working-man in flannel shirt; the gentleman villain in linen'.³¹ Pennell's comments remind us that episodic narratives were not confined

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Shepherds Bush Empire: Programme for week beginning Monday, 12 October 1908 (Hammersmith and Fulham Local Archive).

³⁰ Shepherds Bush Empire: Programme for week beginning Monday, 9 November 1908.

³¹ Elizabeth Robins Pennell, 'The Pedigree of the Music-Hall', *Contemporary Review*, April 1893, 575-83 (p.580).

to popular fiction and periodicals; as she observes, ‘the reign of *Tit-bits* has been inaugurated on the stage as in literature’.³²

Chance was serialized in the *New York Herald* between January-June 1912 and, as Susan Jones notes, this version was sub-titled ‘An Episodic Tale, with Comments’.³³ Through replicating a familiar format from popular magazines and newspapers – and the stage – Conrad could make this novel accessible to a wider readership. These sketches took the form of situation-based ‘playlets’ which, although included in their programmes for some years, had not been legal in music-halls until 1907.³⁴ As a *Saturday Review* article (1891) indicates, this had been the subject of much conflict between the theatrical establishment and music-hall proprietors, who argued over the definition of a ‘stage play’ and its relationship to the music-hall ‘sketch’.³⁵

Chance’s chapter headings refer to situations or locales which are very suggestive of this sketch format. For example, we are presented with ‘The Tea-Party’, ‘On the Pavement’, and ‘The *Ferndale*’. Other headings refer to stereotypical roles: the ‘Girlfriend’, ‘Child’, ‘Governess’, and ‘Devoted Servants’. Furthermore, the novel’s two main parts – ‘The Damsel’ and ‘The Knight’ – have a ‘Merry England’ flavour to them, a popular trope in early-Edwardian London, as I have noted in Chapter 2, and one to which the music-hall played natural homage. Thus Pennell suggests that the minstrels, acrobats and jugglers of the modern music-hall were the natural successors of England’s medieval entertainers.³⁶ It is also notable that pictures of lute-playing shepherds adorn the covers of the Palace Music-

³² Ibid., p.580.

³³ Susan Jones, *Conrad and Women* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp.156-7.

³⁴ See Jacky Bratton, ‘The Music Hall’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. by Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp.164-82 (p.165). Since the 1843 Theatre Licensing Act, narrative-style performances were meant to be exclusive to theatres.

³⁵ ‘Music-Hall “Sketches”’, *Saturday Review*, 6 June 1891, 272-3.

³⁶ Pennell, p.576.

Hall's programmes, while those for the Maskelyne and Devant magic shows probably reflect contemporary fashion as much as their location (St George's Hall, Langham Place).

A letter from 1910, written to an unknown recipient, indicates Conrad's familiarity with the specifics of the sketch format. Claiming that his 'ignorance of stage matters is as dense as a London fog', Conrad then goes on to request more information for a possible collaboration:

I would then consider whether it is within my capacity to do my part of such a sketch. They are 30 minutes' plays – are they not? [...] How to get a dramatic (either pathetic or comical) situation into 30 minutes of which a full half must be given to the songs? *That* seems to me to be the question. (CL4 352)

As Richard J. Hand has shown, Conrad's own plays reveal a familiarity with a rich variety of theatrical conventions.³⁷ His close friendship with John Galsworthy would also have ensured that he kept up-to-date with changes in stage-craft and the debates of the day. Conrad asserted that he had a 'theatrical imagination' (CL4 218) and his interest clearly extended to different genres of performance. This interest is especially apparent in Conrad's letters to the dramatist Basil Macdonald Hastings between 1916-19 when they had collaborated on the stage version of *Victory*. These indicate that Conrad took a keen interest in all aspects of the staging, including the appropriate music for the Zangiaco orchestra – 'No Italian-led orchestra', he tells Hastings in January 1917, 'would dream of playing God Save the King – and in a Dutch possession too!' (CL6 14). Earlier on in his writing career, in 1899, Conrad had been involved with a multi-authored entertainment entitled *The Ghost*, which had been organized by Stephen Crane at his home in Brede Place, Sussex, at Christmas. Along with eight other writers, including H.G. Wells, Henry James and George

³⁷ Richard J. Hand, *The Theatre of Joseph Conrad: Reconstructed Fictions* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Gissing, Conrad contributed a sentence to this ‘mixture of farce, comedy and burlesque’.³⁸ Such a mixture of forms is in keeping with the nature of ‘theatre’ at this time, when there was much debate about the relationship between drama and popular entertainment.

The successful sketch was dependent on a ‘situation’ which was established by a familiar setting and the inter-play between stock characters. Conrad had familiarized himself with the general techniques of stagecraft through work on his first play *One Day More*, which had its inaugural performance in June 1905, shortly before he began *Chance*. In this novel different locales around London are represented in terms which are highly suggestive of a series of stages. There is, for example, the episode outside the dock gates, where ‘young Powell’ encounters stock urban ‘types’: a ‘ruffian’, his accomplice, and a policeman. The latter was, of course, a frequently parodied figure on the music-hall stage.³⁹ As I have noted in the Introduction, the Docks existed as discrete territories, which were hidden away behind high walls and huge gates and monitored by their own police force, one of whom Powell encounters when he arrives to join the *Ferndale*. Such an environment already had an element of natural theatricality to it, through the fact that two scenes co-existed on either side of the walls, between which gates provided entrances and exits. This layout is exploited by Conrad in this episode, through the impressions of sound and light which announce the policeman’s appearance from the other side of the dock gates. In Chapter 3, I have argued that the sound of the footsteps in Brett Strett makes audible the authority of the police. Here, this sound takes on a theatrical tone through the description of the footsteps as ‘coming on’: the constable’s arrival is thus announced, and he duly

³⁸ Ibid., p.6.

³⁹ As parodied, for example, by Gilbert and Sullivan in *The Pirates of Penzance*, and impersonations by ‘Little Tich’. See Pulling, pp.87; 96.

appears, like an actor making an entrance into the limelight. As Powell relates:

The few gas lamps showing up a bit of brick work here and there, appeared in the blackness like penny dips in a range of cellars – and the solitary footsteps came on, tramp, tramp. A dock policeman strode into the light on the other side of the gate, very broad-chested and stern. (24)

Once Powell is inside the dock, there is a further theatricality in the description of the area's criminals, the 'night prowlers', who surge up against the gate, then disband to follow the noise of a 'row' to its source, a nearby public-house, from which there are 'shouts, yells, an awful shrill shriek' (24). While such sounds might suggest the actuality of the nocturnal dock-side streets, the over-riding impression is of the representation of a street and of a staged encounter, in which, according to the traditions of comedy, the pompous constable provides some light relief. The effect is also operatic, which may reflect Conrad's enjoyment of opera. As Laurence Davies has discussed, Conrad had seen operatic performances in Marseilles and Australia in the 1870s, and operatic references recur throughout his fiction.⁴⁰ However, this episode is also very suggestive of a comic sketch and the type of comedic contrast it presents occurs elsewhere in the novel, as in the description of Fyne falling into the lime kiln, which leads to Marlow's observation that this is the 'comic relief of an absurdly dramatic situation' (43).

The trial of de Barral provides another comic situation, complete with the sound of 'bursts of laughter' (63) in the court. As Thomas C. Moser has suggested, Conrad may have been influenced by reports in *The Times* in January 1904, which had related the laughter and joke cracking which

⁴⁰ Laurence Davies, 'Conrad in the Operatic Mode', in *Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts*, ed. by Hand and Baxter, pp.127-45.

took place at the trial of the fraudulent financier Whitaker Wright.⁴¹ More broadly, however, Conrad may allude to the intrinsic theatricality of the London law court, that natural site for the tragi-comedy and the farce, where the ‘great’ like de Barral became notorious when they had their come-uppance. Many commentators on music-hall mention the ‘Judge and Jury Shows’, a popular feature of the old-style ‘sing-songs’; accounts differ, but these seem to have continued in London until either the 1860s or 1870s.⁴² These shows entertained audiences with a ‘burlesque court of law’.⁴³ The Edwardian popular press continued the tradition, transforming cases into an entertainment for consumption, a style which Ford alludes to in *The Soul of London*, where he describes the office boy, clerk, and ‘smart London born workman’ who enjoy reading about ‘Comedy in the County Court’ in their newspapers.⁴⁴ The comedy of the trial in *Chance* is realized by Marlow’s humorous narration, which includes a pun on de Barral’s name: ‘I won’t say in American parlance that suddenly the bottom fell out of the whole of de Barral concerns’ (63). Marlow represents the trial as a performance, which has taken place on a familiar urban ‘stage’, and he adds his own comic contribution. For him, the trial is a ‘sinister farce’ (63) and he later reflects that ‘it is in the Courts of Law that Comedy finds its last refuge in our deadly serious world’ (279).

In the ‘On the Pavement’ episode, when Marlow encounters Flora on the East India Dock Road, he makes a specific reference to finding himself in a ‘situation’ in which comedy, absurdity and pathos combine:

There was something comic too in the whole situation, in the poor girl and myself waiting together on the broad pavement at a corner

⁴¹ See Thomas C. Moser, ‘Conrad, Ford, and the Sources of *Chance*’, *Conradiana*, 7:3 (1975), 203-24 (p.212). See also Hampson, *Conrad’s Secrets*, p.121. Whitaker Wright was found guilty of profiteering by fraudulent means and subsequently committed suicide, like de Barral in *Chance*.

⁴² See, for example, Pulling, p.173 and Scott, *The Early Doors*, p.49.

⁴³ Scott, *The Early Doors*, p.49.

⁴⁴ Ford, *The Soul of London*, p.86.

public-house for the issue of Fyne's ridiculous mission. But the comic when it is human becomes quickly painful. (155)

It is at this point that Marlow also voices his intent to keep a 'tone of comedy' (176) in his conversation, the sound of which recurs throughout the novel. The theatricality of this episode is enhanced by the descriptions of the 'neighbourhood' (179) of this thoroughfare. The action is largely confined to a specific site outside the Eastern Hotel, the entrance of which looms large like a piece of scenery, through which the main actors can enter and exit. As Hampson has argued, the attention to passing traffic in the background also suggests the influence of cinematic set-pieces on Conrad's visual imagination.⁴⁵ However, these impressions, while evoking motion, also suggest the noise of a city that is in the 'background'. In *The Secret Agent*, as I have noted in the Introduction, this effect is suggested by Conrad's description of the London traffic as a 'blended' noise. In this novel, the aurality is similar: the sound of the East India Dock Road is of 'rumbling, composite noises' (185) and the 'continuous dreary shuffling of weary footsteps on the flagstones' (159).

As is the case elsewhere in Conrad's work, such impressions evoke the size of the London crowd and the relentless pace of urban life. However, the manner in which Marlow and Flora converse in the foreground of this scene renders the city into a type of aural 'backdrop', past which the crowd walks 'singly' and in 'twos and threes' (157). Just as the pictures of the faded dancing girls in Verloc's shop ironically contest the impressions of vivacity and gaiety promoted by an increasingly commercialized music-hall, so the sound of the 'shuffling' resists popular representations of London's vibrant pageant of life, as promoted on the music-hall stage. There is no glamour or jollity here, just an 'unsmiling' populace experiencing the harsh realities of ordinary urban

⁴⁵ See Hampson, 'From Stage to Screen', *Joseph Conrad and the Performing Arts*, p.72.

life. A similar impression is provided by the 'East-End park' (255) where Flora and Anthony meet after their marriage. The surrounding city is illuminated by an 'artificial brilliance' and Anthony yearns to get back to his ship and the sea to escape London's 'unnatural animation' (257).

The 'rolling box' (263) of a cab which Flora and her father take to the Docks suggests another performative space, within which the drama is provided by Flora's announcement of her marriage to Anthony. As Marlow describes, 'the interior of that cab, of an aspect so pacific in the eyes of the people on the pavement became the scene of a great agitation' (270-1). Here, the passing crowd may transform into an audience, should this drama spill out onto the street. Marlow imagines Flora's reaction, as her father tries to exit the cab: 'She saw the consequences, the cab stopping, a crowd collecting around a raving old gentleman' (271). The city street then readily becomes a site of popular performance, as Conrad suggests in *The Secret Agent*, where Stevie is engaged by the 'comedies of the streets' and the 'dramas' (13) of falling horses. In a scene similar to that in *Chance*, a cab-based 'commotion' occurs when Stevie protests about the driver whipping the horse and in this case the audience do witness an unfolding drama: 'There were shouts on the pavement, people ran forward, the driver pulled up, whispering curses of indignation and astonishment' (122).

At the Docks, it might be expected that the waiting ships, like the *Ferndale*, offered some respite from, as Marlow later comments, the 'gallery' (243) of shore life. Graham Hough argues that 'the passage about the simple and inescapable claims of the sea turns out to have no particular relevance to the plot of this book'.⁴⁶ On the contrary, the 'gallery', with its

⁴⁶ Graham Hough, *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (London: Duckworth, 1960), p.212.

associations of popular theatre and the music-hall, represents all the inconsequentialities and artificialities of shore life and ‘shore people’ (242) in London, while the sea offers the potential of an escape into a more meaningful existence. At sea, there was no need to put on an act, and ‘no tormenting echoes of your own littleness’ (243). Ships in dock were certainly not places designed for entertainment, as Marlow asserts: ‘A ship in one of London’s older docks with their restrictions as to lights and so on is not the place for a happy evening’ (204). However, young Powell steps on board into what is, in effect, another stage, equipped with a cottage piano and soft furnishings, and sounding like a set for the type of suburban home where an Edwardian comedy might unfold. The ship’s crew even includes a clown-like chief-mate, Franklin, who has a ‘humorously melancholy expression’ (201) and is ‘comically shaped’ (214). The ship becomes, as Marlow terms it, a ‘floating stage’ of ‘tragi-comedy’ (204) and another site for a drama, which in this case is provided by de Barral’s attempt to poison Captain Anthony.

Throughout the comic situations included in *Chance*, Marlow encourages his readership to question what makes something funny and also to witness how humour might be used in different social settings. This interest frequently focuses on Flora, whose intrinsic lack of cheeriness sets her apart from her lower-middle-class cousins, for whom seriousness equates to having social airs. Her cousins find this particularly incongruous, given her father’s imprisonment and her subsequent loss of social status. The function of their ‘chaff’ is to remind Flora of this changed status. In the words of her de Barral’s cousin, Flora can’t ‘stand being chaffed. [...] She won’t take a bit of a joke from people as good as herself anyway’ (127). The humour takes on a rather grim tone and when her cousin arrives to take her back to Poplar, Flora’s failed attempt to

look cheerful unnerves Mrs Fyne. According to Mrs Fyne, this is ‘horribly merry’ (129), and as Marlow comments, it ‘would have been horrible even on the stage’, which stimulates a discussion as to whether or not Flora is a ‘comedian’ (134). Such a discussion might seem odd, until set in the context of music-hall entertainments which parodied the stereotypically serious-minded Suffragette while lauding another representation of femininity, the plucky and cheery girl, of a type personified by stars like Victoria Monks. Their appeal clearly intrigued Ford, and may have influenced Conrad’s characterization of Flora, who so persistently resists this particular stereotype. In March 1909, Ford wrote to Pinker that he had:

a wild desire to write a series of articles on Music Hall Stars – for some of whom I have a great admiration – and on the Music Hall Stage as a factor in popular life. [...] What I want to do is [...] visualise say Victoria Monks and then point out why she is applauded and the light the applause casts on the circumstances and ideas of the lower middle class.⁴⁷

Later, when Flora’s quick-thinking action saves the *Ferndale*, Powell perceives her as a ‘jolly girl’ (239), a phrase which calls to mind feminine insouciance and good humour, of a type displayed by working- and lower-middle-class heroines of both popular fiction and the stage. Baxter has argued of this episode that Flora has had the opportunity to ‘act adventurously as a romance heroine’.⁴⁸ However, through his use of the term ‘jolly’, Conrad is arguably making an allusion to a version of the ‘New Woman’, a figure moulded by popular fiction and music-hall. Such

⁴⁷ Ford, letter to J.B. Pinker, 24 March 1909, *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. by Richard M. Ludwig (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), p.39. Victoria Monks, billed as ‘John Bull’s Girl’, made her first appearance in London at the Oxford Music Hall in 1903. Her trademark songs included those which celebrated London life, like ‘Give My Regards to Leicester Square’. See Roy Busby, *British Music-Hall: An Illustrated Who’s Who from 1850 to the Present Day* (London: Paul Elek, 1976).

⁴⁸ See Katherine Baxter, *Joseph Conrad and the Swan Song of Romance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.98.

a girl was independent and modern enough to be admired for her ‘pluck’ but not so much that she presented a threat, like the Suffragettes.

In this context, it is instructive to compare Conrad’s characterization of Flora with Henry James’s portrayal of the ambitious shop assistant Millicent Henning in *The Princess Casamassima*. Millicent, a ‘jolly girl’ according to Hyacinth Robinson’s view of her, enjoys trips to the music-hall and, rather like the performers there, her persona expresses London and its streets.⁴⁹ Millicent ‘represented its immense vulgarities and curiosities, its brutality and its knowingness, its good-nature and its impudence’.⁵⁰ Millicent is something of a ‘self-improver’, although her ambitions centre on the acquisition of glamour rather than education. She leaves her impoverished childhood behind and achieves independence and employment as a model in a smart haberdashery shop. Indeed, Millicent’s skill at self-transformation unnerves her childhood neighbour, the genteelly-poor dressmaker Amanda Pinsent, who reacts ‘by gazing at her as if she were a public performer of some kind, a ballad singer, or a conjurer’.⁵¹

Millicent is particularly entranced by the glamour of music-hall and Hyacinth’s attraction derives from the appealing image which he presents to her:

What she liked was his face, and something jaunty and entertaining, almost theatrical in his whole person. Miss Henning was not acquainted with any member of the dramatic profession, but she supposed, vaguely, that that was the way an actor would look in private life.⁵²

⁴⁹ Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima*, p.93.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp.97-8.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 97-8.

⁵² Ibid., p.104.

As Jones has discussed, Conrad wrote *Chance* during a period in which women were assailed by different representations of how to be, as the Suffragettes' campaigns became increasingly militant and versions of the 'New Woman' appeared in fiction.⁵³ However, the influence of female music-hall stars on the popular imagination should not be under-estimated, as is suggested by the success of Hall Caine's *The Christian*, with its characterization of the music-hall artiste 'Glory'. The most famous of these stars was, of course, Marie Lloyd, whose act offered a representation of a cheery working-class survivor who could rise above the travails of everyday life. In actuality, as Faulks has discussed, her act was constructed around an 'artful re-staging of street life', a 'self-fashioning of identity' which presented audiences with what seemed to be natural characteristics, the 'very image of working-class lubricity', yet simultaneously presented a skilfully crafted performance.⁵⁴

Such representations of women on the music-hall stage make a suggestive context for Conrad's characterization of Flora, who is, as Marlow comments, a 'girl of our civilization which has established a dithyrambic phraseology for the expression of love' (175). As Siegle has argued, such a term foregrounds the 'verbal patterning of the discourse of courtship', thus 'demystifying love' as a form of culture.⁵⁵ To extend this reading, Marlow seemingly alludes to a modern 'tone' through a classical reference: dithyrambic is defined by its 'irregularity of style' and is 'wild, vehement, boisterous' (*OED*). Flora, more 'damsel' than 'girl', is characterized as being out of step with this culture, in which even love was subject to popularization and commodification. It is possible that, through

⁵³ Jones, pp.100-101.

⁵⁴ See Faulks, p.616. As Faulks discusses, Lloyd was the subject of a memorial essay in 1923 by T.S. Eliot, for whom she exemplified English popular culture.

⁵⁵ Robert Siegle, *The Politics of Reflexivity: Narrative and the Constitutive Poetics of Culture* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), p.93.

Marlow, Conrad alludes here to the boisterous tones of the modern ‘love song’, a genre which was emerging in the early twentieth century, heralding a change of musical style from the romantic ballad.⁵⁶

As is consistent with this characterization, Flora resists the pressure to perform a role or confirm to a modern type of ‘jolly girl’, despite being surrounded by ‘jolly’ but grisly opportunists, like Charley, the ‘supposed nephew’ of her governess and her ‘joking’ de Barral cousins. Marlow’s comment that Flora ‘hadn’t much sense of humour’ (132) thus becomes ironic and complimentary. Through Marlow, Conrad parodies the false and theatricalized manifestations of cheeriness which had seemingly taken such a hold on popular culture. To realize this tragi-comedy of modern manners, Conrad gives Marlow the role of the novel’s comedian.

Marlow: an ‘ultra-modern chorus’

Throughout *Chance*, Marlow embodies a spirit of bantering jocularly, and expresses the ability, like a consummate performer, to change tone as required. The frame narrator comments on Marlow’s demeanour early on in the novel, noting that he ‘had the habit of pursuing general ideas in a peculiar manner, between jest and earnest’ (21). Later, in the ‘Tea Party’ episode, the narrator refers to this manner again, although this time he describes it as a ‘tone between grim jest and grim earnest’ (114). These observations are consistent with Marlow’s own impression that he is taking part in some form of tragi-comic entertainment. Indeed, after Flora’s disappearance, Marlow begs Fyne to tell him whether they are ‘engaged in a farce or in a tragedy’ (44) and later comments to Mrs Fyne,

⁵⁶ See Scott, *Songs of the Bourgeois*, p.203.

‘I am the only ridiculous person in this – this – I don’t know how to call it – performance’ (48).

Conrad’s juxtaposition of jest and earnest recalls the terms of Shakespearian comedy, with which, as noted above, he had become familiar during his youth. As Kiernan Ryan has discussed, plays such as *The Comedy of Errors* are defined by their ‘relentless verbal juggling’ and Shakespeare’s comedic dialogue entertains with its lightness of touch whilst simultaneously revealing some of the darker realities of life.⁵⁷ In a more modern context, an alternately jokey and serious demeanour was the stock-in-trade of the professional clown and the music-hall comedian, as the description ‘serio-comic’ implies. More broadly, Conrad probably associated this style with any type of crowd-pleasing performance: this is suggested by a letter to Eric Pinker in April 1923, where he notes his intention to deliver a speech in America with a ‘mixture of jocularity and intense seriousness’ (CL8 74).

The jest and earnest combination also occurs in *Victory*, with more sinister undertones. Jones, the opportunistic gambler and peripatetic desperado, styles himself as ‘a gentleman at large’ (82). In the first place, Jones’s voice seems so mechanical and devoid of meaning to Heyst that it is tonally ‘dead’: ‘It was the conventional voice of an educated man, only strangely lifeless’ (179). On first meeting Heyst, Jones is concerned that he and his companions Pedro and Ricardo ‘aren’t presenting ourselves in a very favourable light’ (179). Such an interest in self-presentation unnerves Heyst:

But more strange yet was his concern for appearances, expressed, he did not know, whether in jest or in earnest. Earnestness was hardly to be supposed under the circumstances, and no one had ever jested in such dead tones. (179)

⁵⁷ See Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare’s Comedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp.11-12.

This ‘absurd bandit’ (290) is seemingly acting a role. When the two men have a confrontation over Lena, Heyst feels as if he is partaking in some form of popular entertainment. Having lost patience with Jones’s seeming inability to speak truthfully and naturally, he asks him: ‘What sort of comedy is this?’ (289).

As Hampson has argued, *Victory* is a theatrical work in which the characters do not simply participate in a drama, ‘they are also actors consciously or unconsciously acting out parts’.⁵⁸ In *Chance*, the theatricality is rather more specific: Marlow is like a stage clown, surrounded by *dramatis personae* who can’t see the joke. It is useful to compare the comedy of *Chance* with that of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838), a novel which also toys with the idea of jest and earnest, and which Conrad describes in *A Personal Record* as his ‘first introduction to English imaginative literature’ (PR 71). There, in a work full of humour, laughter, and descriptions of popular theatre, the clerk Tim Linkinwater makes the Nickleby family laugh as he discusses (as does Marlow) the subject of marriage:

Tim launched out into several other declarations also manifesting the disinterestedness of his heart, and a great devotion to the fair sex: which were received with no less approbation. This was done and said with a comical mixture of jest and earnest, and, leading to a great amount of laughter, made them very merry indeed.⁵⁹

Nickleby himself demonstrates the qualities of a natural actor, as the actor-manager Crummles notes: ‘There’s genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh’.⁶⁰ There is something of Nickleby in Marlow’s demeanour. However, in a novel with no theatres, but many references to drama,

⁵⁸ See Hampson, ‘From Stage to Screen’, p.66.

⁵⁹ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, p.643.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.283.

comedy, tragedy, and farce, Marlow's humour is allied to his self-consciousness about playing a role. He is aware of 'indulging' a 'chaffing humour' (113), presenting an 'imbecile grin' (150), and deploying 'cheap jocularity' (176) in his conversations with the Fynes and Flora.

It is instructive to compare the theatricality of *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Chance* in the context of the changes which had occurred in acting and stagecraft between the early- to mid-nineteenth-century and the early-Edwardian era. Writing of the stage-craft with which Dickens was familiar, Paul Schlicke notes:

Then, an actor presented a part, in a way that kept the audience continually aware of the man or woman behind the mask. The large gestures and stylized poses enforced the difference between the person performing and the role being performed.⁶¹

Dickens's comic descriptions of Vincent Crummles and his troupe in *Nicholas Nickleby* thereby recall both the versatility required of the jobbing actor and also the explicit and self-conscious artifice inherent in contemporary popular stage-craft. Actors were not required to play roles, within which their own identity had become subsumed, but rather to perform an 'act' and do a 'turn', which could encompass singing, dancing and acrobatics. Schlicke argues that Dickens therefore experienced actors as 'artistes' rather than as 'impersonators'.

Whereas *Nicholas Nickleby* is concerned with theatres and actors, *Chance* engages with theatricality as a metaphor for the artificiality of shore life and shore people. Having established the shore as the 'stage', Conrad then includes, through Marlow's narration, allusions to specific entertainments like the 'nigger minstrels' and 'dancing dogs'. These function as comic similes, which introduce a sense of the ridiculous into a

⁶¹ Paul Schlicke, 'Introduction', *Nicholas Nickleby*, pp. xiii-xxxii (pp.xxii-xxiii). [Intro to NN](#)

serious situation. After Flora's disappearance, for example, Marlow has a sudden vision of 'three trained dogs dancing on their hind legs' (46), a familiar spectacle from music-halls in the 1890s.⁶² Later, the pompous Fyne's attempts to quieten his dog are described thus: 'Fyne's deeply modulated remonstrances abashed the vivacious animal no more than the deep, patient murmur of the sea abashes a nigger minstrel on a popular beach' (108). The sound of the minstrels, which could be heard in various sites of popular entertainment, thus provides an aural contrast: this is an intrusive and man-made noise which competes with the natural rhythms of the sea. As such comparisons are voiced by Marlow, the dancing dogs and the minstrels are like 'turns' which have become embedded into his narrative, functioning as textual support acts to his own routine.

Unlike Dickens's era, the period when Conrad was writing *Chance* also witnessed much debate about what made something 'funny', as Marlow's reactions to the situations in which he finds himself reflect. Flora's indignation when her dog deserts her is, for example, 'funny but not humorous' (132). As Wolfgang B. Fleischmann has noted, there were many articles and books which theorized about laughter in the 1890s and early-1900s, including three significant studies: Bergson's *Le Rire* (1899), James Sully's *Essay on Laughter* (1902) and Freud's *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum unbewussten* (1905).⁶³ When the frame-narrator of *Chance* asks Marlow if he finds 'something comic' in Flora's story, Marlow seemingly alludes to these publications:

⁶² See, for example, the programme for the Palace Music-Hall, 10 December 1896, which includes Professor Duncan and his Collie Dogs, alongside the 'blackface' artist Eugene Stratton and comedians Dan Leno and George Robey (V & A Theatre Collection).

⁶³ Wolfgang B. Fleischmann, 'Conrad's *Chance* and Bergson's "Laughter"', *Renascence*, 14:2 (1962), 66-71 (p.68).

But don't you know that people laugh at absurdities that are very far from being comic? Didn't you read the latest books about laughter written by philosophers, psychologists? There is a lot of them...

(212)

Fleischmann argues for Marlow as a 'disciple of Bergson', who finds himself in a comedy revolving around 'pathetic and desperately unlucky characters'.⁶⁴ These characters cling to misguided notions about their freedom; according to Bergson's terms, the comedy would thereby lie in their actual status as puppets of fate.⁶⁵ However, it is arguably the English psychologist James Sully who was the greater influence on Conrad. As John E. Saveson has suggested, Conrad may have been introduced to Sully's work by H.G.Wells.⁶⁶ Certainly, in *An Essay on Laughter*, Sully engages with ideas which are applicable in a wider and more everyday context, including that of popular theatre and fiction. For example, he is engaged by the distinction between 'laughable' and the 'comic', and what might constitute a 'comic spectacle'.⁶⁷ This is, Sully concludes, 'for one who uses language with precision, a presentation which is choice, which comes up to the requirements of art and which would be excellent material for comedy'.⁶⁸

Through Marlow's interest in comedy, the influence of Sully's ideas on Conrad may be apparent. However, Marlow seems to be more of a practitioner of comedy rather than one of its theorists. The frame narrator enquires whether Marlow and Powell have been 'having good healthy laughs together' (212), a question which recalls, as I have noted at the beginning of this chapter, the impression of rather over-worked

⁶⁴ Fleischmann, p.69.

⁶⁵ As Fleischmann discusses, Bergson's 'theory of the ludicrous' in *Le Rire* argues that comedy and laughter derive from inflexible assertions of moral superiority: we laugh due to the rigidity with which people try to be virtuous and therefore find people's good qualities as funny as their faults.

⁶⁶ See John G. Saveson, *Joseph Conrad: The Making of a Moralist* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1972), p.89.

⁶⁷ James Sully, *An Essay on Laughter: Its Forms, its Causes, its Development and its Values* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), p.86.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

cheeriness which seems to have imbued the music-hall entertainments of this period. Conrad was also surrounded by fans of music-hall in the period of *Chance*'s conception. Prominent amongst these was, of course, Ford. In his editorial for the *English Review* in January 1909, Ford asserts that the music-hall expresses an energy and 'novelty' lacking in theatre: 'Indeed it is to the music-hall that we must go nowadays for any pulse-stirring – for any consummate expression of an art'.⁶⁹ Ford's sub-editor Douglas Goldring shared this appreciation of the artistry of the contemporary music-hall star. In his essay, 'Low Tastes' (1920), Goldring mocks the 'art-snobs', who miss the 'genius' of performers like Robey, Vesta Tilley, Little Tich and Marie Lloyd.⁷⁰ Then there was Arthur Symons, with whom Conrad had become more closely acquainted in 1911, as a neighbour in Kent.⁷¹ Like Kipling, Symons was particularly engaged by the vitality of music-hall, writing admiringly of the 'entire spectacle, with absurd faces, gestures, words, and the very odour of suffocating heat'.⁷²

Wyndham Lewis, whose early work was published in the *Review*, was another admirer of music-hall and related entertainments like burlesque and farce. Lewis was not in Conrad's immediate circle. However, through reading Lewis's short story 'The Pole' (published in the *Review* in May 1909), Conrad may have become aware of the younger writer's techniques, which included, as Bernard Lafourcade has discussed, the presence of a *farceur* figure in the narration, who paradoxically takes on the serious role of a truth-seeking outsider possessing a wisdom which

⁶⁹ Ford, Editorial, *English Review*, January 1909, p.320.

⁷⁰ Douglas Goldring, 'Low Tastes', in *Reputations*, pp.205-6.

⁷¹ See Stape, pp.181-2.

⁷² Arthur Symons, [Music-halls and Ballet Girls], untitled typescript, quoted in *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. by Karl Beckson (London: Pennsylvania University Press, 1977), p.109. In his memoirs, *Something of Myself* (London: Macmillan, 1937), p.81, Rudyard Kipling similarly recalls being enthralled by the 'relaxed humanity' at Gatti's Music-Hall at the Villiers Street venue, off the Strand.

eludes the other characters.⁷³ Lewis was also interested in the idea of a narrator with a distinctive personality, like that of a ‘showman’ orchestrating the action, a persona which is not too different from that of Marlow in *Chance*.⁷⁴

Marlow’s attempts to determine whether he is in a comedy or tragedy, together with his relentless jesting and self-conscious awareness of ‘tone’, suggest that Conrad may have become engaged by the story-telling comedians of music-hall, whose artistry depended on the sound, pace and tone of their narration. If Conrad did have an admiration for the verbal skills of the old-style music-hall comedians, this would be consistent with his evident dislike of Chaplin and early cinema, as I have noted in Chapter 1. In his letter to Eric Pinker in 1923 about his plans for a speech, Conrad had also aired his views on cameras generally, noting that the literary artist was ‘much more subtle and complicated’ (CL8 74). An interest in verbal comedy would also have been consistent with that being shown in literary circles at the time, notably in periodicals with which Conrad was involved, like the *English Review*. This interest was no doubt stimulated by the deaths of some of the great Victorian comics like Leybourne, Vance and Leno.⁷⁵ Their comic songs and verbal repartee now seemed to belong to a past age.⁷⁶ On Dan Leno’s death in 1904, Max Beerbohm, not normally an admirer of music-hall, wrote in the *Saturday Review* of the great comic’s skill: ‘No other music-hall artist threw off so many droll sayings – droll in idea as in verbal expression’.⁷⁷

⁷³ Bernard Lafourcade, ‘Afterword’, *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. by Lafourcade (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), p.208. See also Keith Tuma, ‘Wyndham Lewis, *Blast* and Popular Culture’, *ELH*, 54:2 (1987), 403-419 (p.403).

⁷⁴ See Lafourcade, p.407.

⁷⁵ George Leybourne had died in 1884, Alfred Vance in 1888, and Dan Leno in 1904. See Patrick Beaver, *The Spice of Life: Pleasures of the Victorian Age* (London: Elm Tree Books, 1979), p.88.

⁷⁶ See, for example, W.R.Titterton in *From Theatre to Music Hall* (London: Stephen Swift and Co., 1912), p.123. Titterton observes that ‘the music-hall becomes less and less the home of song, and more and more a place of spectacle’.

⁷⁷ Max Beerbohm, ‘Dan Leno’, in *Around Theatres* (London: Rupert Hart-Davies, 1953), p.349.

The main appeal of comedians like Leno derived from how they sounded, as they created a picture in their audience's minds of the characters with whom they had engaged in an imaginary conversation. Some acts involved straightforward impersonation, while others cleverly wove into a narrative the sound of social 'types' (like the policeman, cab-man, and swell) who would be familiar to their audience. This could be a skilled process, as Beerbohm noted of Leno:

He never stepped outside himself, never imitated the voices of his interlocutors. He merely repeated before making his reply a few words of what they were supposed to have said to him. Yet there they were, as large as life before us.⁷⁸

In similar vein, in an article in the *English Review* in August 1911, the drama critic G.H. Mair recalls a visit to a music-hall where he had witnessed a 'unique and perfect comic experience' provided by an unnamed 'star' who 'realised the humour' of his story so 'fully and completely' that his listeners gave way to 'tides of laughter'.⁷⁹ Mair goes on to make a specific reference to George Robey, agreeing with a 'subtle critic' who had located Robey's act within the traditions of *commedia dell'arte*.⁸⁰ Like Leno, Robey was a master at engaging his audience. As Mair comments: 'A comedian like Mr. Robey isolates and brightens to the *nth* power traits that the gallery knows well enough in common clay', while reminding his readership that Robey represents a fast-disappearing form of entertainment: 'We cannot have our George Robey and Marie Lloyd and Harry Lauder for ever'.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ G.H. Mair, 'The Music-Hall', *English Review*, August 1911, 122-29 (p.122).

⁸⁰ That 'subtle critic' is likely to have been C.E. Montague, who was later to be an enthusiastic reviewer of *Chance*. Montague's appreciation of Robey is reproduced (undated) in James Agate, *Immortal Toys: A Survey of the London Stage, 1920-1943* (London: Cape: 1945).

⁸¹ Mair, p.128.

In early July 1914, Conrad surprised his son Borys by accompanying him to see Robey in Sheffield, where they were staying while Borys took the university's entrance exams.⁸² As Borys recalls, 'it was not the sort of entertainment anyone who knew him, would have expected him to attend'.⁸³ Conrad evidently found Robey very funny, unlike examples of the more 'inferior comedian', whom he 'glared at in grim silence'.⁸⁴ There are several factors which may have stimulated Conrad's interest in Robey. Firstly, he may have recalled enjoying the comedian's performances in the 1880s and 1890s at, for example, the 'Royal Aquarium', a music-hall which Ford recalls his friend attending.⁸⁵ Conrad's curiosity may have also have been stirred by the articles by Mair *et al.*, which argued that the artistry of Robey's verbal skills should be more widely appreciated. Robey had, as his biographer terms it, an 'ecstatic relish for words', which widened his appeal to those who did not normally enjoy that 'sort of entertainment'.⁸⁶ Robey was also a safe choice, his reputation and popularity with the British establishment having been assured by his inclusion in the 1912 Command Performance. Conversely, he also appealed to the artistic avant-garde, as a representative of a (once) working-class entertainment, offering an energy and vitality missing in the theatre. Robey was amongst those 'blessed' in *Blast*, which had been launched by Lewis and Pound earlier that year, as Conrad may have been aware through his connection with Ford and Goldring. Robey was included alongside other music-hall stars like

⁸² See Stape, *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, p.196.

⁸³ Borys Conrad, *My Father* (London: Calder & Boyer, 1970), p.84.

⁸⁴ Ibid. Sheffield had various music-halls and popular entertainment venues and unfortunately Borys does not mention which one they attended. The *Sheffield Independent* and the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* make no mention of this particular performance. It is possible that Conrad and Borys saw one of Robey's frequent benefit shows for soldiers and sailors. As Peter Cotes notes, Robey was an especial supporter of the Merchant Navy (which may also have stimulated Conrad's interest) and he was also known for appearances in the provinces. See Peter Cotes, *George Robey: The Darling of the Halls* (London: Cassell, 1972).

⁸⁵ See Ford, *Joseph Conrad*, p.111. The Aquarium was opposite Westminster Abbey.

⁸⁶ See Cotes, p.36.

George Mozart, Gertie Millar and Harry Weldon in a list that, as William Wees has noted, provides a guide to ‘what occupied the avant-garde minds of pre-War London’.⁸⁷

Chance had already been published by the time Conrad saw this particular performance of Robey’s. However, Conrad’s interest seems significant, given the jesting tone he had ascribed to Marlow throughout *Chance*. In some instances, what first appears as over-written scene-setting, becomes a comic *tour de force* when read aloud. For example, the extract below from ‘The Fynes and the Girl-Friend’ includes many examples of traditional comedy, including a pun, repetition, comedic hesitation, and comically pompous-sounding polysyllabic words. Marlow also ‘under-cuts’ the mood of the scene with a moment of comedy, as Fyne’s clown-like face disrupts his idyll:

And it was a fine day; a delicious day, with the horror of the Infinite veiled by the splendid tent of blue; a day innocently bright like a child with a washed face, fresh like an innocent young girl, suave in welcoming one’s respects like – like a Roman prelate. I love such days. They are perfection for remaining indoors. [...] Then looking up from the page I saw outside a pair of grey eyes thatched by ragged yellowy-white eyebrows gazing at me solemnly over the toes of my slippers. There was a grave, furrowed brow surmounting that portentous gaze, a brown tweed cap set far back on the perspiring head. (51)

This is ‘linguistic dalliance’, to use Michael Pickering’s term, of a type which was practised by the original ‘nigger minstrel’ acts from America, but which was also a feature of traditional English clowning.⁸⁸ As Bratton and Featherstone have discussed, this involved ‘aural coincidence’ and other forms of verbal humour, like the ‘under-cutting’ of a serious narrative

⁸⁷ William Wees, *Vorticism and the English Avant Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972), p.43.

⁸⁸ Michael Pickering, ‘White Skin, Black Masks: “Nigger” Minstrelsy in Victorian England’, in *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, ed. by J.S. Bratton (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986) pp.70-91 (p.81).

by a comedic detail.⁸⁹ As I have noted at the beginning of this chapter, the chairmen of the old-style music-halls continued in this tradition of verbal by-play.

‘Cross-talk’ was another comedic tradition deriving from the ‘nigger minstrels’ and originally involving an ‘interlocutor’ and a ‘cornerman’ who indulged in verbal sparring.⁹⁰ This had its modern counterpart in the comedic double acts of late-Victorian and early-Edwardian music-hall. Douglas Kerr has argued for the influence of ‘cross-talk’ elsewhere in Conrad’s work, noting, for example, that sections of dialogue between Kayerts and Carlier in ‘An Outpost of Progress’ (1898) follow the ‘logic of comedy’ in their verbal patterns, with the two men conversing like ‘comic colleagues’.⁹¹ In *Chance*, it is notable that the frame narrator takes on the occasional role as Marlow’s ‘interlocutor’, while the rest of the ‘cast’ prove unsatisfactory as sparring partners. Consistent with her own role as the seriously-minded feminist, Mrs Fyne, as Marlow comments, ‘didn’t know what to make of my tone’ (115), while her husband persisted in taking a ‘serious view of the sublunary comedy’ (113).

During the period in which *Chance* was a work-in-progress, Conrad would have encountered different manifestations of verbal humour at the Maskelyne and Devant magic shows, where it played an important role in diverting the audience from the performance of the tricks. In *Our Magic*, the magicians devote a whole chapter to ‘patter’, discussing in some detail the importance of delivering ‘appropriate remarks and witticisms’.⁹² During his trips there with his sons, Conrad would have witnessed a

⁸⁹ See Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone, *The Victorian Clown* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.151.

⁹⁰ See Pulling, p.189.

⁹¹ Douglas Kerr, ‘Conrad and the Comic Turn’, unpublished essay (personal communication: 2012).

⁹² Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant, *Our Magic: The Art in Magic, the Theory of Magic, the Practice of Magic* (London: Routledge, 1912), p.135.

sophisticated and modern version of a traditional art, which was designed to appeal to a discerning audience amongst whose number, as Maskelyne and Devant explain, ‘there are sure to be persons to whom verbal errors are as distasteful as sour gooseberries’.⁹³ In a letter to John Galsworthy in January 1908, Conrad notes that he had ‘spent my last loose shillings in taking B to Maskel[e]yne’ (CL4 19). Programmes from St George’s Hall for 1907 and 1908 give an indication of the type of entertainment on offer at that time. Alongside sketches setting the scene for Devant’s ‘illusions’, with titles such as ‘A Comedy of Marvels’, the programmes include Percy French (whose turn is described as ‘The Art of Humour & The Humour of Art’) and singers at the piano, including Barclay Gammon in ‘An alleged humorous Musical Interlude’.⁹⁴ Magic tricks were performed by Mr. Louis Nikola in a ‘series of wonderful experiments in sleight of hand’, which includes one entitled ‘The Topsy Turvey Tea Table’.⁹⁵ If a unifying ‘tone’ to such acts may be discerned, it is that of a peculiarly English ‘whimsy’, which is a suggestive context for the comedy of *Chance*, wherein Marlow even finds potential for ‘entertainment’ (109) at Mrs Fyne’s cluttered tea table.

Echoes of Conrad’s borrowings from such entertainments seem to echo in the rhythms of Marlow’s speech and his enjoyment of polysyllabic words, alliteration and assonance. Most notably, in ‘The Tea Party’ episode, he repeats ‘sagacious’ and its variants numerous times, in a style which recalls the comic songs of Gilbert and Sullivan. Lester notes that most musical references in Conrad’s fiction are from classic opera, although he does appear to have been familiar with Gilbert and Sullivan’s work: in his 1912 essay on the *Titanic* inquiry, for example, Conrad dubs

⁹³ Ibid., p.141.

⁹⁴ Examples from programmes for Maskelyne and Devant’s Mysteries, 3 May 1907 and 7 December 1908 (Mander and Mitchenson Archive).

⁹⁵ Ibid. Programme for 7 December 1908.

one of the officials a ‘Pooh-Bah’ and refers to the whole procedure as a ‘felicitous opera-bouffe of the Gilbertian type’.⁹⁶ In this context, the performances of the above-mentioned comic singer Barclay Gammon are of interest, as he frequently appeared with Maskelyne and Devant, singing in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan.⁹⁷ Gammon’s name recurs in accounts of popular entertainment during this period, such as that by Titterton, who comments:

He borrows [Gammon] from Gilbert and Sullivan with delightful aplomb, quite sure you will not know or not mind how much he has borrowed. And he gets clapped for Gilbert’s wit and Sullivan’s playful lilt.⁹⁸

Contemporary recordings of Gammon capture a uniquely English and Edwardian sound, of comic singing within the traditions of music-hall (with similar targets, like the Suffragettes) while also recalling the piano playing and ballad singing of the Victorian ‘at home’.⁹⁹

Conrad’s characterization of Marlow in *Chance* has attracted much critical comment. He is generally regarded as an unreliable story-teller, whose narration, to use Hampson’s description, is full of ‘uncertainties and indeterminacies’.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Paul Wake argues that Marlow should be regarded as a ‘source of narrative’ not a ‘source of truth’.¹⁰¹ For Jacob Lothe, Marlow’s ‘non-committed distance from his narrative’ is problematic in *Chance* as it involves an irony which is ‘limited and predictable’.¹⁰² However, such a perception may arise from interpreting the style of Marlow’s narration solely as a device of the printed text and

⁹⁶ See John Lester, ‘Conrad and Music’, in *Conrad’s Literary Career*, ed. by Keith Carabine, Owen Knowles and Wiesław Krajka (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1992), pp.247-61 (p.248).

⁹⁷ See David Devant, *My Magic Life* (London: Hutchinson, 1931), p.95, where he describes Gammon as ‘one of the jolliest humourists we ever had’.

⁹⁸ See Titterton, p.171.

⁹⁹ British Library Sound Archive, Barclay Gammon, ‘Suffragettes’ Anthem’/ Sullivan (ICD0057949, 1910).

¹⁰⁰ Hampson, *Betrayal and Identity*, p.197.

¹⁰¹ Wake, p.119.

¹⁰² Jacob Lothe, *Conrad’s Narrative Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.39.

missing those examples of unpredictable irony which are reliant on the sound of his pronouncements, into which the humour is embedded by comedic tones and rhythms. The irony and comedy do not, therefore, derive from Marlow's explicit comment, but rather from, to recall Bratton's phrase, 'aural coincidence'. In 'The Great de Barral' episode, for example, de Barral's attempt to re-assert his status is demolished by Marlow reporting his self-important statement, with its unintended comedic rhythm: 'After all I am still de Barral, *the* de Barral' (273).

As Robert Siegle first noted, *Chance*'s frame-narrator was a novelist in the serial version.¹⁰³ Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan queries why Conrad chose to leave out this feature from the book version, as this would have foregrounded the textuality of the novel.¹⁰⁴ Marlow's narration, as she argues, constantly reminds the reader of the 'fictionality' of his account.¹⁰⁵ The answer may be that Conrad intended Marlow to be heard as much as read, which would be consistent with the allusions he makes to popular performance, as well as to 'stories', 'chapters' and 'light literature'. Finally, it is instructive to end with a consideration of the contemporary reviews of *Chance*, which frequently draw on theatrical metaphors and in which the idea of 'Conrad the producer' is a recurring theme. For example, Edward Garnett comments that Conrad 'sardonically brings together on his stage as heterogeneous a collection of types as might be culled in any metropolitan hotel', a description which recalls the type of sketch with a claustrophobically English setting that Conrad may have encountered at the Shepherd's Bush Music-Hall.¹⁰⁶ At the same time,

¹⁰³ Robert Siegle, 'The Two Texts of *Chance*', *Conradiana*, 16:2 (1984), 83-101 (p.89). The serialized version was published in the *New York Herald* between January-June 1912.

¹⁰⁴ Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan, *Joseph Conrad and the Modern Temper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.160.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.153.

¹⁰⁶ Edward Garnett, *Nation*, 24 January 1914. Quoted in *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Sherry, pp.277-80 (p.278). , pp1973)

Garnett's criticism that 'the author's shadow is projected too obtrusively on the curtain' suggests that this novel was somewhat over-produced, as its authorial method was too obtrusive.¹⁰⁷ Such was the basis of Henry James's critique, for whom the 'drama' and the 'show' lay in the complexities of Conrad's narrative technique, which was marred by the 'eccentricities of recital'.¹⁰⁸ Elsewhere, C.E. Montague was more complimentary, referring to *Chance*'s 'corps of narrators', with Conrad as a 'master controlling the vision'; he concludes that 'No artist's figure looms more formidably behind the thin curtain of authorship than Mr Conrad's'.¹⁰⁹ However, perhaps the most interesting reading comes from *Punch*, who describe Marlow as an 'ultra-modern chorus'.¹¹⁰ Such a term alludes to the traditions of classical drama, whilst locating Marlow as a peculiarly modern figure.

The terms used by *Punch* recall Conrad's description of Marlow in the 1917 Author's Note to 'Youth', where he describes his narrator's first performance thus: 'he was supposed to be all sorts of things: a clever screen, a mere device, a "personator," a familiar spirit, a whispering dæmon' (5). These 'all sorts' are actually rather familiar, in their suggestion of an entertainment: a trick, impersonation or illusion. In the 1920 Author's Note to *Chance*, Conrad writes of his 'hope of being entertaining' (333), which he arguably achieved through the persona he had created for Marlow. It has been said of music-hall between 1908-1914 that the producers negotiated an 'accommodation between forms', as variety shows and early cinema competed for the attention of

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Henry James, 'The New Novel' in *Notes on Novelists with Some Other Notes* (London: Dent, 1914), p.276.

¹⁰⁹ C.E. Montague, *Manchester Guardian*, 15 January 1914. Quoted in *Conrad: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Sherry, pp.273-76 (pp.274-5).

¹¹⁰ Mr. Punch's Staff of Learned Clerks, 'Our Booking Office', *Punch*, 28 January 1914, p.79.

audiences.¹¹¹ Such a term may be usefully applied to *Chance*, a novel in which allusions to print collide with those to popular performance. The significance of both is dependent on the sound of Marlow, who represents a modern version of the oral story-teller, and whose primary function is to entertain.

¹¹¹ See Dave Russell, 'Varieties of Life: The Making of the Edwardian Music-hall', in *The Edwardian Theatre: Essays on Performance and the Theatre*, ed. by Booth and Kaplan, pp.61-85 (p.65).

Conclusion

The distracting level of noise which Marlow hears on the East India Dock Road in *Chance* expresses a defining experience of urban modernity. Whether or not the streets of early-Edwardian London were actually any noisier than those in the previous century is a question that must remain unanswered. As Emily Thompson notes, audiometric devices for measuring sound were not available until the mid-1920s.¹ In *Chance*, Conrad's description of the conversation between Flora and Marlow on this road suggests a battle between voice and traffic, during which, as Marlow expresses, 'One had to say something if only to assert oneself against that wearisome, passionless and crushing uproar' (158). This episode echoes the experience of Winnie Verloc and her mother in *The Secret Agent*, who, as I have noted in the Introduction, have to shout and scream their conversation during the cab ride to the Peckham almshouses.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce evokes a similar auralty. In the carriage *en route* to Paddy Dignam's funeral, Mr Dedalus has to cry 'above the wheels', during a journey in which the effects of different road surfaces are particularly apparent: as the carriage passes over cobbles, the wheels and windows rattle while smoother roads ensure a quieter progress.² Other street noises intrude, like the sound of a street organ which 'sent over and after them a rollicking rattling song of the halls'.³ Thus sounds both compete with and pursue their human quarries. This effect is also apparent

¹ See Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p.14. The first such study was probably in America in 1926, when Edward Elway Free (science editor of *Forum* magazine) used an audiometer to measure noise in New York.

² Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 86.

³ *Ibid.*, p.94.

in the description of the Silenus restaurant in *The Secret Agent*, where the conversation between Ossipon and the Professor is interrupted by the noisy pianola. As I have argued in Chapter 4, there is a comedic incongruity to the sound of the pianola in this episode. However, it also takes on a more serious function as a reminder of how the modern urban dweller is assailed by intrusive mechanical sounds, which impose an inhuman volume, rhythm and pace. Visually, the pianola might belong in a traditional Victorian parlour; aurally, it is aggressively new:

An upright semi-grand piano near the door, flanked by two palms in pots, executed suddenly all by itself a valse tune with aggressive virtuosity. The din it raised was deafening. When it ceased as abruptly as it had started, the bespectacled, dingy little man who faced Ossipon behind a heavy glass mug full of beer emitted calmly what had the sound of a general proposition. (52)

As if in response, the ‘sound’ of the Professor takes over. This also seems machine-like, as is appropriate for one who carries a detonator which is, as the Professor will later assert to Ossipon, a ‘perfectly precise mechanism’ (56).

As Tim Armstrong has suggested, the pianola ‘occupies an important place in the history of technology’ between the traditional and the modern, as represented respectively by the piano and the new auditory technologies of the phonograph and gramophone which offered the new experience of sound ‘storage’.⁴ Throughout his London fiction, Conrad’s representation of the city’s sounds recalls the changes occurring in the auditory environment. However, the sounds of the new technologies are less in evidence than those which relate more particularly to an individual’s day-to-day experience of the modern city. Some interrelated themes may be identified which reveal the wider significance of Conrad’s

⁴ Tim Armstrong, ‘Player Piano: Poetry and Sonic Modernity’, *Modernism / Modernity*, 14:1 (2007), 1-19 (p.3).

sound impressions and suggest new approaches through which to revisit the modernity of his work.

Firstly, there is the sound of the crowd and of the lone voice within that crowd, both of which signify the isolation of the individual, a familiar Conradian theme. The 'voice' had a wider social significance in a period of change, when it also signified the demand for greater 'rights'. Related to this, as I have argued in Chapter 1, there is the sound of the 'platform', as manifested by the popular oratory of those who sought to persuade the crowd. As Conrad writes in 'A Familiar Preface': 'The power of sound has always been greater than the power of sense' (*PR* xiii), a statement which is particularly apposite for his treatment of the 'workman orator' in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* and elsewhere. Conrad expands this by noting that 'written words have their accent, too' (xiii), an assertion which reminds us of the importance of speech when considering Conrad's treatment of language.

Commerce is another recurring theme in Conrad's London. It is notable how many of Conrad's urban noises are either directly or indirectly related to work, from the slamming doors of the City underground trains in 'The Return', to Donkin's whining on the *Narcissus*, and the racket of trade on the East India Dock Road in *Chance*. In this context, Conrad's aural impressions of London may be interpreted as a form of auditory resistance which chooses not to celebrate the city's purposeful 'business' but rather to foreground impressions of isolation and exhaustion. A similar expression of resistance may be discerned in Conrad's treatment of the symbolic London 'silence', as I have argued in Chapter 2. In the wider context of the imperial city, silence was both valued and feared, as a symbol of respectability yet also of inertia and inactivity. The opposition between silence and noise is central to any 'hearing' of the

London soundscape. In ‘The Return’ such impressions become sinister, as they reveal the fragility of an ostensibly secure social hierarchy whilst simultaneously suggesting the threat of a noisy descent into disorder and disaster.

Related to the above, the theme of the ‘outdoors’ also recurs in Conrad’s treatment of London’s sounds. In *Chance*, there are episodes (not explored in this thesis) which express the popular opposition between town and country. However, Conrad’s particular engagement with the idea of ‘out of doors’ is also revealing. This is represented by the sounds of the streets in *The Secret Agent* and ‘The Return’, and also by the impressions of natural disasters in the latter. Such sounds threaten the sanctity of the domestic interior, and recall a city in which the individual faced the dismantling of old certainties and the often spiritually unsettling acquisition of scientific knowledge about the world.

London’s streets and the peculiarities of its topography may be identified as a theme in its own right. As I have suggested in Chapter 3, *The Secret Agent* reveals how an individual’s experience of modernity could be influenced by their location within the city, during a transitional period for news dissemination. The telephone was yet to make its impact, but the city was nevertheless more ‘connected’ in spatial and temporal terms, as the civic improvement process continued and information was exchanged at an ever greater pace. This has made another revealing context in which to revisit the theme of isolation. In the city represented in *The Secret Agent*, this condition is allied to the experience of being disconnected from the process of news exchange.

Finally, there are the sounds of performance, which encompass Donkin’s attempts at ‘workman oratory’, Hervey’s sermonizing, and most notably, as I have argued in Chapter 4, the entertainment of Marlow’s

narration in *Chance*. Through this narration, Conrad combines the old with the new, as the tradition of story-telling manifests itself in a more modern guise, as a form of popular comedic performance which had come to be especially associated with London's music-halls. Indeed, Conrad's position as an 'early Modern' becomes especially apparent through a study of the sound impressions in his work, as these suggest a period of transition – for entertainment, for the news, for auditory technologies and, of course, for the streets themselves. More broadly, this thesis has made an important contribution to debates about the nature of Conrad's modernity and the relationship of his work to that of the 'high modernists', like Joyce and Woolf. In answer, then, to my original question, Conrad's London does 'sound modern' but his auditory impressions also evoke the process of change which informed that early modernity. In this context, it is useful now to briefly re-visit some of the above themes in the context of later works like *Victory* and the changes in attitudes towards noise brought about by the First World War. This period also witnessed the Futurists' foregrounding of urban noise an aesthetic in its own right.

Firstly, it needs to be recalled that the sound of the individual human voice had a particular symbolism in London in the years preceding the First World War. The traditional cries of street trade and theatrical performance had begun their inevitable slide from actuality to folklore, a process which attracted comments in the *Newsbasket* (W.H. Smith's trade journal) in 1910, in response to complaints about the shouting newsboys:

It seems to us we are rapidly descending into an age of vocal silence; legislation, traffic, gramophones, sedentary lives, and a woeful lack of *joie de vivre* are all depriving us of lung exercise. Who ever heard of anybody in the habit of shouting being miserable?⁵

⁵ 'The Passing Show', *Newsbasket*, May 1910, p.102 (W.H. Smith Archive).

This process was influenced, of course, by the increasing amount of ambient street noise. As Marlow experiences on the East India Dock Road in *Chance*, traffic noise made ‘vocal silence’ a seemingly easier option than conversation. The effect of the noise is to demolish Flora’s sentences into random words. As Marlow recalls: ‘The ugly street-noises swelling up for a moment covered the next few words she said. It was vexing. The next word I heard was “worried”’(162). London’s auralty thereby suggests the movement of a malign sea wave, which drowns out the human voice and distorts its expression. Conrad clearly intended his readership to imagine Marlow raising his voice and shouting in this episode, in order to compete with the surrounding noise. Indeed, Marlow recalls that he ‘shouted’ when the noise became ‘distracting’, which reminds us that the modern environment could be discomforting in both auditory and visual terms. In ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, Benjamin writes of the manner in which the film image presented a picture of ‘multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law’.⁶ Marlow experiences the same fragmentary effect from the sounds of the street. His self-amplification may be understood as an act of self-assertion and of resistance, during a time when the competing vocalities of mechanization were becoming ever more audible.

A study of the occurrence of urban street conversation in modern and post-modern fiction might reveal the extent to which this new auditory environment had a conscious or unconscious effect on the literary imagination. The ‘stream of consciousness’ style naturally suggests a narrative foregrounding of ‘self-conversation’. As an extension of this thesis, it would be interesting to consider the extent to which the London street maintained its narrative usefulness as a place for the random encounter *and* conversation. This was a purpose fulfilled by the Strand at

⁶ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, p.227.

the end of 'Karain' and by Tottenham Court Road in *The Secret Agent*, although it is notable that Chief Inspector Heat and the Professor conduct their conversation in a quiet and deserted alley nearby, rather than on the busy thoroughfare itself. Similarly, it may not be coincidental that in Gissing's *New Grub Street*, Whelpdale (having nearly missed Jaspar Milvain amongst the crowds on the Strand) 'drew him aside into a court' in order to give him the news of his job on the *Chit-Chat*.⁷

In Joyce's *Ulysses*, 1904 Dublin is the site for observation *and* conversation. In contrast, Virginia Woolf's London seems to be a place of watching and wondering about others, rather than human engagement within the crowd. In 'Street Haunting' (1927), for example, the narrator catches fleeting sounds of conversation, while remaining detached and in awe of the passing stream of visual impressions.⁸ Similarly, while there are, as Angela Frattarola has discussed, many sound impressions in *Mrs Dalloway*, it is the visual experience of London which predominates.⁹ The passers-by may be alerted, for example, by the sound of the passing aeroplane, but it is the sign-writing in smoke which engages their full attention, seemingly rendering the entire world 'silent'.¹⁰ In the case of Maisie Johnson, newly arrived in London, the sight of Septimus and Lucrezia Smith seems destined to become a sound which will 'jangle' in her memory for years to come.¹¹ In this instance, the plethora of human experience to be encountered in the modern city is internalized through the noise it creates in the mind.

⁷ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, pp.478-9.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. IV, 1925-28, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994).

⁹ Angela Frattarola has considered the importance of auditory experience in both Joyce and Woolf. See 'Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 33:1 (2009), 132-154.

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.22.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.28.

A similar impression occurs in *Chance*. On the kerb of a London street ‘young Powell’ feels ‘as if an engine had been started going under my skull’ (22). Powell is recalling an earlier period of his youth, but this is an interesting description in the context of the early-Edwardian era, when Conrad wrote this novel. Powell is getting ready to join the *Ferndale*, and is caught up in the ‘hurry’, ‘worry’ and ‘growing exultation’ (23) of the preparations for his trip. The crowd around him seem numbed, unfriendly and indifferent to his excitement. Powell’s description of his thoughts as a form of internal mechanism foregrounds an impression of human isolation while suggesting a city in which time speeds past, like the meters in the motorized cabs. Once inside the cab, Powell feels as if: ‘That engine in my head went round at its top speed’ (23). The modern city thus imposes an unnatural pace and speeds up an individual’s thought processes. Indeed, as Siegle notes, Conrad had written a powerful description of the psychological effect of commercial street noise in the serial edition of *Chance*, where he described the sound of commerce as ‘killing thoughts and emotions’, while the people on the street were imagined as mechanized objects, ‘like trees walking [...] as if made of wood with some sort of talking arrangement inside’.¹² At its noisiest, this auditory environment transforms the human into a machine. At other times, the sound of the human voice still intrudes, but it is genderless and linguistically meaningless. This is suggested by Woolf’s treatment of the cry of the beggar-woman in *Mrs Dalloway*, which is a ‘voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end [...] with an absence of all human meaning’.¹³ Woolf abstracts human vocality to the extent that it becomes symbolic of a spring of water in primeval London. Moreover, through associating this sound with the city’s underclass, she foregrounds an impression that they are also out of place in modern London.

¹² Siegle, ‘The Two Texts of *Chance*’, p.90.

¹³ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, p.88.

Due to the plethora of advertisements on the streets, ‘written’ London now seemingly had its own ‘voice’, as the contemporary coinage ‘boomed’ for promotional activity suggests. A description in Wells’s *Tono-Bungay* makes explicit this sensory experience of the visual and aural:

Tono-Bungay shouted at me from a hoarding near Adelphi Terrace, I saw it afar off near Carfax Street, it cried again upon me in Kensington High Street and burst into a perfect clamour, six or seven times I saw it, as I drew near my diggings.¹⁴

As Rubery has suggested, the newspapers also had their own voice, a ‘disembodied’ expression of speech without all the paralinguistic features of tone and gesture.¹⁵ In this period, the individual voice thus had a powerful representation as a human (natural) sound, in contrast to the figurative clamour of print and the artificial racket of traffic, gramophones, telephones and, as would be experienced during the First World War, the machinery of warfare.

The First World War may be identified as the historical ‘moment’ when such aural contrasts became especially apparent, as Ford’s reactions as a soldier express. In 1916, he writes to Conrad of a ‘curious opportunity with regard to sound’, and makes elemental comparisons: the sound of thunder, he notes, had ‘extinguished’ the sound of artillery and a Howitzer gun.¹⁶ In this context, how audible one could naturally be, whether through shouting like Marlow, or expressing one’s oratorical range, like Verloc, or asserting one’s rights, like Donkin and Hervey, was a newly pertinent question. However, with modernity came amplification, the ‘dinning cacophony of the modern’, to use Connor’s terms, when modernity expressed the ‘human

¹⁴ H.G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.139.

¹⁵ Rubery, p.152.

¹⁶ *Letters of Ford Madox Ford*, ed. by Ludwig, p.71.

capacity to make inhuman noise'.¹⁷ Once the microphone had been invented, sound levels could exceed the innate potential of the human voice and the auditory properties of the natural environment.

The experience of war, combined with a greater understanding about the scientific properties of sound, arguably allowed for a new awareness of the potential of aural impressionism in literature. Conrad's own engagement with the aesthetic possibilities of aural impressions seems to be particularly evident in this period. The 1917 Author's Note to *Heart of Darkness* suggests a self-consciousness about the relative effects of the visual and aural impression:

There it was no longer a matter of sincere colouring. It was like another art altogether. That sombre theme had to be given a sinister resonance, a tonality of its own, a continued vibration that, I hoped, would hang in the air and dwell on the ear after the last note had been struck. (6)

As I have discussed in the Introduction, Jameson argues that in *Nostromo* Conrad engages with ideas about 'pure' sound. However, it is arguably not until the later work *Victory* that such an interest is apparent. The appearance of such impressions in this novel is consistent with the emerging interest in noise as an aesthetic in its own right. For example, Heyst makes a distinction between listening to an instrument's 'tune' and its 'tone' (60), thus expressing the musical equivalent of a triumph of form over content. In contrast, Heyst's audition of Lena's voice is a truly sensual experience, as this expresses the 'mere vibrating, warm nobility of sound' (60). This contrasts with the aural distortions of the Zangiacomo orchestra who play with a 'vulgar, ferocious energy', which is not 'making music' but 'simply murdering silence' (55).

¹⁷ Steven Connor, 'Feel the Noise: Excess, Affect and the Acoustic', in *Emotion and Postmodernism*, ed. by Hoffmann and Hornung, p.152. As Connor notes, the first microphone was invented with the telephone in 1876.

Heyst is both repelled and fascinated by the sheer volume of noise made by the orchestra; there is, as the omniscient narrator notes, ‘an unholy fascination in systematic noise’ (55). This reaction is consistent both with the popular recognition that the modern age was getting systematically noisier and with the Futurists’ project to celebrate urban noise. By the time Conrad had completed *Victory* at the end of 1914, they had had some coverage in the London press, including *The Times*, which Conrad may have seen.¹⁸ In June 1914, for example, Marinetti and Russolo appeared at the London Coliseum, where *The Awakening of a City* was performed by ‘noisicians’, as *The Times* posited they might be called, apparently to cries of ‘No More!’, from the audience.¹⁹ Russolo had first launched his ‘Art of Noises’ manifesto in 1913, and the first ‘noise-music’ concert had taken place at Marinetti’s Milan home that year. In his manifesto, Russolo suggests we ‘cross a large modern capital with our ears more sensitive than our eyes’ and ‘delight’ in the sounds of the streets and industry.²⁰ Amongst the ‘noise instruments’ he created was a ‘hummer’, representing, as I have noted at the beginning of this study, one of modernity’s most defining sounds. Russolo’s description of the ‘low, continuous noise’ of the city and the streets as ‘an infinite mine of noises’ reflects an emerging interest in urban sounds.²¹

Like Ford, Russolo also served as a soldier in the First World War, where he made similar aural comparisons to Ford, noting ‘Artillery, when still out of range, is announced by a distant murmur, exactly like thunder’.²² Ford’s *Parade’s End* expresses the extent to which the sounds of warfare were perceived as having their own inhuman vocality. In the

¹⁸ Conrad appears to have been a regular reader of *The Times* in this period. As Stape notes in *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, p.185, his essay ‘Some Reflexions, Seamanlike and Otherwise, on the Loss of the *Titanic*’ was based on accounts in *The Times*.

¹⁹ ‘Art and Practice of Noise: Hostile Reception of Signor Marinetti’, *The Times*, 16 June 1914, p.5.

²⁰ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. by Barclay Brown (New York: Paragon Press, 1986), p.26.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.44-5.

²² Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, p.50.

volume *No More Parades* (1925) the crashing masonry of Tietjens's hut expresses its own mechanical language: 'An immense tea-tray, august, its voice filling the black circle of the horizon thundered to the ground. Numerous pieces of sheet-iron said, "Pack. Pack. Pack"''.²³ Ford ascribes a corporality to these noises. They invade the body, seemingly forcing thoughts themselves to turn up the volume: 'Tietjens's thoughts seemed to have to shout to him between earthquake shocks'.²⁴ The soldiers were obliged, rather like Marlow on the East India Dock Road, to try to 'out-shout the row', as Tietjens observes.²⁵ For Sylvia Tietjens, the sounds of battle have a similarly invasive quality. Even the 'thrillings' of the gramophone can't compete with the 'incredible volume' of warfare.²⁶ Having previously felt loftily detached from this global event, she becomes reluctantly subsumed into the common experience of the crowd: 'She had to scream against the noise; she was no more responsible for the blasphemy than if she had lost her identity under an anaesthetic. She *had* lost her identity....She was one of this crowd!'.²⁷

As Sylvia Tietjens's experience expresses, the modern period may also be defined as one of auditory collision. In *Some Do Not* (1924), a motor car collides with Tietjens's horse, creating 'a crash and scraping like twenty tea-trays, a prolonged sound'.²⁸ Here Ford appropriates a domestic object in his authorly struggle for an auditory comparison, thus exemplifying Schweighauser's point that modern writers 'had to contend with a radically altered soundscape that threatened to exceed their powers of representation'.²⁹ In his aural impressions, Conrad tends to eschew

²³ Ford, *Parade's End*, p.291.

²⁴ Ibid., p.308.

²⁵ Ibid., p.305.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 439-40.

²⁷ Ibid., p.139.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Philip Schweighauser, *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Towards a History of Literary Acoustics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), p.29.

such comparisons, in favour of onomatopoeic and echoic words, as in the case of the Verlocs' cab ride in *The Secret Agent*, the jangling and jolting of which textually embeds the sounds, in a similar way to Joyce's treatment of the noise of the carriage in *Ulysses*.

Conrad's correspondence records his own experience of the First World War from his home in Kent, as he listened to the sounds of the German Zeppelins as they made their way to bomb the capital. To recall Truax's terms, Conrad's experience suggests a combination of 'listening-in-search' and 'listening-in-readiness' audition.³⁰ The former is the traditional habit of the sea captain, used to straining for aural clues. The latter suggests the anxious experience of modernity and specifically of war: the source of the sound is heard but not seen, and the listener must wait for information about its meaning. The anxiety that this type of auditory experience could engender is apparent in Conrad's war story 'The Tale', which was first published in 1917. At the beginning of 'The Tale', the Commanding Officer of a naval ship tells his listener (who is generally presumed to be his mistress) that this will not be a 'noisy story' (*TH* 62). He recalls having to ascertain the identity of a vessel in the vicinity of his ship. The other vessel transpires to be neutral, but not before it is experienced as an unknown threat in a sound-muffling fog. As one of the officers comments, 'the strange thing is that we never heard a sound from her' (*TH* 69). The lack of sound thus becomes menacing, in an environment where auditory clues have taken on a new significance. Conrad notes in a letter to Eugene F.T. Saxton on 17 August 1915 how that evening he has been 'listening to the hum of an airship's engines filling the night air', and that he will have to wait until morning (presumably to read the newspaper reports) before discovering whether this was the sound of a Zeppelin or English airship (*CL5* 500). A letter to

³⁰ See Truax, p.22.

John Galsworthy, circa 10 September 1915, further expresses Conrad's interest in these new ambient sounds and in the nature of audition itself: 'The night was calm and starry and I followed the ill omened noise dying away to the eastward behind the woods' (CL5 506).

The above is a poignant reversal of the experience of the traveller hearing the auralty of the city on their approach; in this case, the Zeppelin pilot brings with him the noise of future destruction. As an incoming sailor, Conrad's own early auditory experiences of London were of a riverine border beyond which a substantial proportion of the urban throng were engaged with maritime-related commerce. As I have noted above, the sound of work recurs in his London fiction, sometimes in terms which romanticize the simplicity of ship-board labour and provide a bleak perspective of London's shore-based commerce. This contrast is, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, especially apparent in *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*. In a letter to Henry S. Canby in April 1924, Conrad asserts that the *Narcissus* offered the crew isolation from all the 'land entanglements' (CL8 339). Hampson has discussed the significance of these 'entanglements' in the contrasts made by Conrad between the life of the sea and shore, and to extend this reading, Conrad seems to have heard modern London as a city in which the individual might be especially entangled by commercial activity.³¹

Indeed, in the 'On the Pavement' episode of *Chance*, Conrad seems to suggest that Londoners had to figuratively and actually get out of the way of their city's vast commercial enterprise: Marlow rescues Fyne, to avoid his being crushed by the 'lumbering wheeled traffic', with its 'racket' of goods piled high (179; 159). Despite this, Conrad took a somewhat romanticized view of the Thames, although this seems to have derived

³¹ See Hampson, *Betrayal and Identity*, p.137.

from an appreciation of the natural topography of its estuary, which delays the sights and sounds of industry, as he describes in ‘The Faithful River’:

Amongst the great commercial streams of these islands, the Thames is the only one I think open to romantic feeling, from the fact that the sight of the human labour and the sounds of human industry do not come down its shores to the very sea, destroying the suggestion of mysterious vastness caused by the configuration of the shore. [...] there is nothing so far down to tell you of the greatest agglomeration of mankind on earth dwelling no more than five-and-twenty miles away, where the sun sets [...] and the dark low shores trend towards each other. (*MoS* 102-3)

The sea’s natural expanse is thus replaced with London’s material expanse, the rumblings of which must have expressed a dreary contrast to the natural elements. Watts has argued that Conrad’s romanticism of the sea – his ‘maritime version of the pastoral’ – overlooks the commercial inter-dependency between sea and shore.³² However, Conrad’s aural impressions suggest that he may have simply heard a contrast between the straightforward noises of manual labour on board ship, and the irritating hums, jangles and rumbles of trade in the city. This is the sound of mindless activity rather than the rhythms of the purposeful labour to which he had become accustomed on board ship, as ‘Emblems of Hope’ (1905) describes:

The getting of your anchor was a noisy operation on board a merchant ship of yesterday – an inspiring, joyous noise, as if, with the emblem of hope, the ship’s company expected to drag up out of the depths, each man all his personal hopes into the reach of a securing hand [...] And this noisiness, this exultation at the moment of the ship’s departure, make a tremendous contrast to her arrival in a foreign roadstead – the silent moments when, stripped of her sails, she forges ahead to her chosen berth. (*MoS* 21-22)

³² Cedric Watts, ‘Conrad and the Myth of the Monstrous Town’, in *Conrad’s Cities*, ed. by Moore, pp.17-30 (p.20).

As Juliet MacLauchlan has also noted, a contrast between the values of shore and sea recur in Conrad's writing, especially in *Chance*, where it becomes 'a sustained battle'.³³ The wider city was shackled to the exigencies of the City's commerce and rather than expressing an antipathy towards the great imperial project, Conrad engages with the human cost, as Marlow expresses:

Great vans carrying enormous piled-up loads advanced swaying like mountains. It was as if the whole world existed only for selling and buying and those who had nothing to do with the movement of merchandise were of no account. (158)

London's temporality was driven by the rhythms of this commerce in a city popularly perceived to never sleep, as Conrad's description of the nocturnal river traffic at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* evokes. The street traffic around the Docks does appear to have ceased at night: as I have noted in Chapter 1, the 1889 Dock Strike caused a day-time quietude which was perceived to be unnerving. In keeping with Dr Johnson's famous maxim, Edwardian London continued to be perceived as a vital and energetic city. This was the conceit that could be read in popular journalism and heard in the jaunty musicality of popular theatre. This is an impression which Conrad resists. His is not, to borrow from George Sims's title, a 'Living London', nor does it seem to have, *contra* Ford's homage, much of a soul. In this respect, Conrad's city is very different from Ford's. Ford clearly delighted in the energizing effect of the crowd. In *Ancient Lights* (1911), for example, he recalls the throbbing night-time streets around Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus, typically packed with people heading to the music-halls and theatres. A short section of dark pavement is enlivened with sound:

In that short passage of darkness there will be innumerable sounds of happiness, innumerable laughs, the cries of paper boys, the voices of

³³ Juliet MacLauchlan, 'Conrad's "Decivilized" Cities', in *Conrad's Cities*, pp.57-84 (p.69).

policemen regulating the massed traffic; the voices of coachmen calling to their horses.³⁴

As Hampson has discussed, Ford romanticized and poeticized London during this period, in keeping with contemporaries like Arthur Symons, Laurence Binyon and W.E. Henley.³⁵ In contrast, Conrad's city is notably subdued. Conrad's seeming refusal to engage with scenes of vibrant street life (especially those associated with the trope of a preternaturally energized working-class) allows him to evoke the actualities of grim poverty as emphatically as social realists like Gissing and Morrison. In his description of children in the street near the Professor's home in Islington in *The Secret Agent*, for example, a single word works to negate an experience that even the most unsentimental might regard as an inherently positive scene: here, the children squabble 'with a shrill, *joyless*, rowdy clamour' (53; emphasis added).

While the contrast between the wild East End and the subdued West End was often expressed as an opposition between noise and silence, the former was also suggestive of the disengagement and stasis of poverty, and the latent criminal menace of night-time streets in poor areas, particularly around the Docks, as young Powell experiences in *Chance*. In an unpublished article, Arthur Symons notes that the 'dark, curious cornered streets near the Docks have a wicked air peculiar to themselves [...] the street is quiet but you realize that it is plotting something secretly, and you walk in suspense at this suspected villainy of things'.³⁶ Those left out of the 'stream' of frenetic activity could only stand and watch, like the 'three dismal, sodden loafers' (186) who Marlow describes staring at Flora in *Chance*. Conrad well knew this experience

³⁴ Ford Madox Hueffer [Ford], *Ancient Lights and Certain Reflections: Being the Memories of a Young Man* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1911), p.288.

³⁵ Hampson, "'Topographical Mysteries'", p.168.

³⁶ Arthur Symons, 'East and West End Silhouettes', unpublished typescript (undated), quoted in *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, ed. by Beckson, pp.77-80 (p.77).

of London in limbo, through his own periods of unemployment as a sailor waiting for a new ship's berth. In *A Personal Record*, Conrad describes the offices of the London Shipmaster's Society as his 'resting-place' (*PR* 116) where he could feel closer to the sea. In *Chance*, Marlow is released from shore-life by a 'prosaic offer of employment', which gives him a 'sudden sense of having wasted my time on shore long enough' (189).

Pre-First World War London may be described as a city of two rhythms. The official sound of the imperial city was of pomp, pageantry and cheery Cockneyism, as exemplified by Elgar's *Cockaigne Overture*, composed in 1901.³⁷ The sound best left unheard was the sombre beat of poverty, the tones of which are conveyed by Vaughan Williams's 'Hunger March' movement at the end of *A London Symphony*, which was composed in 1911, and first performed in 1914. Inspired by the last chapter of Wells's *Tono-Bungay*, Williams's symphony expresses London's social contrasts. Beginning with the bright sounds of the street, it changes pace in the last movement: as a contemporary programme note puts it, this is a 'ghostly march of those whom the city grinds and crushes'.³⁸ Williams, a socialist like Wells, resisted the celebratory and self-satisfied tones of the imperial city, choosing instead to express the actuality of a divisive society. There is no evidence that Conrad heard or knew about *A London Symphony*. However, this work is revealing as an aesthetic, and politicized, response to London's defining auralty which

³⁷ Although it would seem that even Elgar acknowledged the city's darker side; he was apparently considering a sombre sequel to *Cockaigne* entitled *City of Dreadful Night*. See David Bury, 'Elgar, the Eton Housemaster and the Coronation Ode', in *Cockaigne: Essays on Elgar in London Town*, ed. by Kevin D. Mitchell (Rickmansworth: Elgar Editions, 2004), pp.94-137 (pp.101-2).

³⁸ Contemporary programme note written by the conductor Albert Coates and approved by Williams. Quoted by Alain Frogley in 'H.G. Wells and Vaughan Williams's *A London Symphony*: Politics and Culture in Fin-de-Siècle England', in *Sundry Sorts of Music Books: Essays on the British Library Collections*, ed. by Chris Banks, Arthur Searle and Malcolm Turner (London: British Library Books), pp.299-308 (p.302).

provides an interesting context for Conrad's own resistance to more popular representations of the city.

As its capital, London embodied the nation's past and its future aspirations. Williams's work challenges the 'official' soundscape, and gives musical expression to that sense of social unease present in Wells and Conrad's fiction. Despite his avowed dislike of socialism, Conrad's impressionism reveals those 'joyless' social truths which the contemporary attempts to revive the myths of 'Merry England' sought to mask visually and aurally. Conrad appears in *Tono-Bungay* in the guise of a 'Romanian Jew' captain of the boat in which the narrator (George Ponderevo) makes an expedition to an island off the African coast, in order to steal the lucrative 'quap' needed to save his uncle's business.³⁹ As Ponderevo recounts, the captain was perpetually 'carping at things English', in terms which mocked the nation's bourgeois values and servitude to profit.⁴⁰ The captain's opinion of England as 'all limited and computing and self-seeking' is rather ironically evidenced by Ponderevo's own entrepreneurial activities.⁴¹ The captain's perspective also chimes with the city which Ponderevo will experience at the end of the novel, as he travels down the Thames in his newly-invented destroyer. Ponderevo finally reaches the port of London, that 'last great movement in the London symphony' before the freedom of the open sea.⁴² His impressions of the city's monstrous growth and the 'unassimilable enormity of traffic' are consistent with Conrad's, especially in the stark comparison made between the crowded dock-side and the open sea.⁴³ London becomes the loci for modernity at its worst, a material maze, a

³⁹ See Edward Mendelson, 'Introduction', H.G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp.xiii-xxvii (p.xx).

⁴⁰ Wells, *Tono-Bungay*, p.321.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.322.

⁴² Ibid., p.385.

⁴³ Ibid., p.386.

cancer, which has grown out of control. Through his narrator, Wells explicitly uses aural terms to emphasize a pessimistic ‘note of crumbling and confusion’ for the future, which he then offsets with the sound of ‘another note’ expressing the idea that the intangible and ‘enduring’ values of humanity may still break through.⁴⁴

Through his journey down the Thames, Ponderevo also experiences a sense of London’s history, in terms which recall Marlow’s empathy with the city’s ancient past in *Heart of Darkness*. However, Ford recalls that Conrad was usually uninterested in the ‘archeologies’ and historic personages of the city.⁴⁵ The latter was ‘somebody’s London’, as enshrined by street names (as ‘The Return’ evokes) and by the former homes of the wealthy and famous. Conrad engaged instead with the sensory experience of the present for all the city’s ‘nobodies’, disregarding impressions from the city’s seemingly more illustrious past in favour of those which captured the actuality of its present. Conrad’s impressions of isolation in the city are especially vivid. As Hampson has argued, the streets which surround Hervey’s in ‘The Return’ and those through which Ossipon wanders at the end of *The Secret Agent* are described in terms which foreground the experience of alienation in the city.⁴⁶

This study has taken as its focus those works where London is represented in detail. However, it should be noted that London exerts a wider textual influence across Conrad’s work. One of the defining features of London’s auralty was arguably its dissemination across the colonies, both through the sounds of ‘live’ imperial celebration and

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.388.

⁴⁵ Ford, *Joseph Conrad*, p.239.

⁴⁶ Robert Hampson, ‘Spatial Stories: Joseph Conrad and James Joyce’, in *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp.54-64 (p.60).

through the phonograph, and its successor the gramophone, across the Empire. As the century progressed, it was arguably harder, in auditory terms, to get ‘clear’ of London. An urban predilection for ‘airs’, light opera and, of course, the stridently patriotic tunes of music-hall could be heard out in the Eastern Archipelago as much as on the streets and in the concert halls of London. As Ford describes in *The Soul of London*, an English government administrator working in India could take with him ‘a phonograph, which supplied him with piano music from St James’s Hall and the latest songs of the Empire’.⁴⁷ As the transportation of Nelson’s piano in *Freya of the Seven Isles* (1912) suggests, this was a cumbersome instrument to transport. That piano, a ‘beautiful rosewood monster’, involved the toil, as the narrator notes, of several people to get that ‘heaviest movable object on that islet since the creation of the world’ (*TLS* 151). Before the availability of phonographs, music-boxes offered a similar portability, and had also brought the sounds of home to alien environments in the British colonies. These were at the height of their popularity between 1850-1880, during which period operatic music predominated on the repertoires, although patriotic songs and ballads were also included.⁴⁸ This was partly due to the tastes of their customers, at first drawn from the middle- and upper-classes. As the boxes became cheaper and thus more accessible to a wider audience, the manufacturers included music-hall songs. By the early-1890s, the boxes had declined in price, but also in quality and appeal, and some were given away free with magic lanterns – an interesting reflection of the popular appeal of

⁴⁷ Ford, *The Soul of London*, p.25.

⁴⁸ There are several studies tracing the history of the music-boxes, including: J Alexander Buchner, *Mechanical Musical Instruments*, trans. by Iris Irwin (London: Batchworth Press, 1954); John E.T. Clark, *Musical Boxes: A History and an Appreciation*, 3rd edn (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961); Arthur W.G. Ord-Hume, *Clockwork Music* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973); and David Tallis, *Musical Boxes* (London: Frederick Muller, 1971).

such visual entertainments in the period before gramophones were widely available.⁴⁹

The predominance of opera on the music-boxes was also due to technical considerations, as arias were found to be suitable to the early ‘comb and cylinder’ mechanisms of the ‘mandolin’ type boxes.⁵⁰ This appears to have been especially the case with Verdi’s two great operas, *La Traviata*, and *Il Trovatore*, which are enjoyed by Lakamba and Babalatchi in *Almayer’s Folly*.⁵¹ The organ on which Babalatchi plays *Il Trovatore* is, however, suggestive of an ‘organette’. Cheaply made in Germany, these played music on paper rolls or card discs, and were operated by turning a handle.⁵² The cultural reach of Verdi’s *Il Trovatore* extended beyond the world of opera. This was a populist piece, as its inclusion on the music-boxes suggest, and one which had been frequently performed in London since the late-1850s. Along with *La Traviata*, *Il Trovatore* also features on contemporary music-hall programmes in the 1880s, as part of the musical ‘overtures’, which preceded the main entertainment. In its mechanically iterative manifestation on the music-box, therefore, the sound of Verdi references a similar modernity as ‘Blue Bells of Scotland’, whilst epitomizing an auditory experience which the new technologies were making portable.

Finally, outside of those works with a London setting, the wider influence of the city’s culture on far-flung locations frames Conrad’s *œuvre*. In Conrad’s first novel *Almayer’s Folly*, the narration observes that ‘The deliberations conducted in London have a far reaching importance’ (28), while the city’s influence is still apparent in the late

⁴⁹ Ord-Hume, *Clockwork Music*, p.193.

⁵⁰ See Tallis, pp.40-41. The ‘comb’ had groups of ‘teeth’ which were all tuned to the same note. When plucked by pins on the cylinder, a trill effect was produced.

⁵¹ A surviving ‘mandolin’ music-box from the 1870s (in the ‘World of Mechanical Music’ museum in Northleach, Gloucestershire) includes *Il Trovatore* on its repertoire.

⁵² Clark, *Musical Boxes*, pp. 83-84.

novel *Victory*. There, the city hovers in the textual background, as the actual home of Heyst's father and Lena, together with, in more symbolic terms, Jones and Ricardo. London keeps intruding on life in Samburan, most notably through the nihilistic philosophy of Heyst's father, but also through the impoverished background of Lena which has left her vulnerable to the exploitative practices of Zangiacomo. London also intrudes in *Victory* in the guise of Jones and Ricardo whose blend of opportunism, duplicity and criminality arguably represents the actuality of the city's criminal world, rather than, as Mara Kalnins has suggested, a manifestation of the Freudian other-worldly and 'uncanny'.⁵³ It is notable that Ricardo first encounters Jones at the West India Docks. Ricardo has brought the culture of the rough and wild dock-side streets with him; indeed, it is possible, as Peter Bagnall has argued, that he may be read as a fictionalized Jack the Ripper.⁵⁴ More broadly, Ricardo personifies those traits of urban opportunism which are especially associative of its street culture. As he tells Schomberg, he is 'game for anything' and this extends to the extremes of criminality: 'from pitch and toss to wilful murder' (102). Ricardo thereby vocalizes the monstrous city which imposes itself on the elemental peace of Samburan.

The London topography clearly continued to fascinate Conrad. In *Freya of the Seven Isles* he returns 'old Nelson' to 'one of those Bayswater squares, once of leisure, which nowadays are reduced to earning their living' (TLS 233). Similarly, in *Victory*, Conrad chooses to locate Heyst's father in a 'quiet London suburb' (73). The instruction of Heyst senior to 'Look on – make no sound' (134) has accompanied his son around the world and confined him to an existence of emotional

⁵³ Mara Kalnins, 'Introduction', *Victory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.xiv-xxxviii (p.xxxi).

⁵⁴ Peter Bagnall, 'Joseph Conrad and Jack the Ripper' (unpublished DPhil thesis), University of Oxford, 1999.

isolation which is especially associative of his father's London home. Heyst experiences the isolating effect of being just one of a crowd and the city becomes an appropriate locale in which to achieve a complete detachment from humanity. Once the daytime transit of life has ceased, the street transforms (like Hervey's square in 'The Return') into a graveyard:

The noises of the street had died out one by one, till at last, in the moonlight, the London houses began to look like the tombs of an unvisited, unhonoured, cemetery of hopes. (134)

The figurative and actual baggage of such an existence has been transported by Heyst from London to the Eastern Archipelago. Heyst calls for the books, furniture and ornaments of his father's home to be sent out to him in Samburan; he has imagined this domestic clutter 'reproachful and mute, shrouded and locked up in those rooms, far away in London with the sounds of the street reaching them faintly' (135). Within the narrative structure of *Victory*, the first descriptions of this London home immediately precede a scene where Heyst enjoys the 'silence of his surroundings' in Samburan: this is broken only by the elemental noises of wind, forest and trees and is conducive to 'solitary meditation' (133). After his father's funeral, Heyst had ruminated about the nature of the urban 'stream', visualizing the London streets, full of 'fatuously jostling, nodding, spinning figures' (134). In this novel, Conrad once more makes auditory comparisons which foreground the experience of modernity. London's vast crowd are indifferent to the individuals within their midst and unaware that another 'voice' (that of Heyst's father) has been 'suddenly silenced' (134). The disregard of the urban crowd towards this silenced voice suggests both the ultimate inconsequentiality of Heyst senior's existence and, more particularly, of his philosophical ideas and writings. This representation of a textual 'voice' is then reinforced by

Heyst's thoughts about how the obituaries for his father will 'shriek their little shriek' (135). This episode exemplifies how Conrad continued to resist the aural equivalent of popular stereotypes which celebrated London's noise and bustle, instead suggesting it as a place of ceaseless but ultimately futile activity. As is consistent with their significance throughout Conrad's London fiction, such sounds reveal much about the wider experience of modernity in a city where its effects could be most acutely felt.

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